



THE THREE VOCATIONAL THEMES:
EXPLORING WHERE THE CAREER MAKES SENSE

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Introduction

Customized Employment (CE) is a process that builds upon the foundation of Supported Employment. 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; and, in the case of wage employment, a negotiation between the potential employee (and often a representative) and the employer. CE is a non-comparative approach to employment; therefore in most cases typical application and interview processes are afterthoughts, indulged only to meet any existing hiring protocols. Crucial to the CE process are vocational team members that understand the proper steps of Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) (functional assessment), interest-based negotiation, job analysis, systematic instruction, job carving, and job creation. CE represents an economic development approach to employment that eschews the vestiges of historic charity models (e.g. "Hire the Handicapped"), and labor market studies, while recognizing that wages are the residue of profits created through an individual's contribution to a company. Customized Employment means people earn commensurate wages, each job is individualized (so no group placements), no multiple-owner self-employment ventures (perhaps the occasional partnership) or agency-operated "cooperatives," "social enterprises" or other schemes. CE is truly one-person-at-a-time.

Time, Money, Ideas

Among the biggest barriers to good employment development is the paucity of information and ideas about what work actually occurs in a given community. The lack of connectedness disability agencies have to their towns or neighborhoods complicates this problem. Many other factors contribute to this distance and lack of knowledge. Foremost is the idea that time and money are in short supply. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Many people with significant disabilities spend 20 to 30 years in day programs waiting to "be ready" for employment that never comes. We need to be cognizant of just whose time we are considering. Furthermore, during that long tenure, Medicaid day-funding expenditures alone average somewhere between \$240,000 and \$360,000. This very conservative number doesn't include medical care (Medicare and Medicaid), case management, transportation, Social Security payments, the cost to families, or the impact that living in relative isolation and poverty has on people. Compared to employment development costs ranging between \$5000 and \$10,000 for

typical community employment, neither time nor money seems to be the substantive issue.

The Abundance of Small Business

Another major issue is our understanding of community and business. Much of the employment data, practices, and policies surrounding disability systems are faulty; they are based on a big-business view of the world that does not exist. No one is suggesting that IBM, GM, GE, and other Fortune 1000 companies do not have a major impact on our economy, but at the local, functional level, CE is best implemented in the ubiquitous small companies that populate the countryside and contribute over 85% of all new jobs. In fact, according to the Kaufman Foundation for Entrepreneurial Leadership, big business generated no new net jobs in the past 4 years. With over 20 million single owner-operator firms out of a total 37 million businesses in the United States, and only 17,000 of these businesses having more than 500 employees, small business is the place for job development. But why?

1. Because most small business is under-capitalized, which means they could use talent that helps them generate more revenue. Using a Resource Ownership (Griffin, Hammis, Geary, 2007) strategy that provides tools, skills, and technology that make an individual more productive, is easily funded through SSA Work Incentives or Vocational Rehabilitation for instance;
2. Because most small businesses do not have Human Resource managers or written job descriptions that have to be changed or circumvented as in larger companies;
3. Because in smaller companies it's much easier to reach the decision maker;
4. Because small business owners and managers gravitate towards job seekers with similar interests, whereas in bigger companies the HR manager, who likely does not have a shared interest with the job seeker, often stands between making this connection to the production floor. Hiring is personal in a small company. And, people with similar interests are more likely to mentor and coach one another. Artisans, after all, run most small companies, not MBAs. Artisans have and share skills that help employees grow competent, leading to better jobs in the future.

Quite frankly, small businesses don't pay much attention to what GE or IBM or Microsoft do when it involves hiring people with disabilities. Except perhaps to wish that they were themselves big enough to absorb something that looks suspiciously like another government program to them. The fascination with big business in the disability employment policy, research, and service provider environments is another disconnection to the realities of modern hiring and economic development.

Vocational Themes

The development of Vocational Themes evolved over the past decade of implementing Customized Employment in numerous sites across the U.S. and Canada (Griffin & Keeton, 2010). The process of identifying themes is a natural outcome of the Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) strategy. Too often in the past, job development hinged on rapid-

fire determination of an individual's interests, and then divining a few job ideas. Most of us only know of a few jobs, and we tend to think in job descriptions, instead of discerning the tasks and skills a person has or is likely to learn through structured teaching using systematic instruction. Because so few employment staff know how to teach complex tasks effectively, and how to engage the natural worksite trainer in the process, we job develop only to our own competence level and experience. This is why we have stereotypical jobs as the rule: grocery bagging, rolling silverware, janitorial; and microenterprises of equal blandness including the production of greeting cards and paper shredding. Now, there is nothing wrong with any of these employment options. The critical question to ask is: Do these jobs lead to a better job through the development of skills and talents? Unfortunately, they often do not.

Because so many folks with serious disabilities only get one or two chances at community employment, the process we use to identify potential jobs must be rigorous. Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) is designed to generate no fewer than 3 overarching vocational themes. The themes are not job descriptions. They are large umbrella topics that represent an accumulation of many jobs, environments, skills/task sets, and interests. Too often someone may have an interest in say, flowers. The stereotypical job suggestion is likely to be: Work in a greenhouse or assist at a florist shop. This is very limiting for both the individual and the person charged with managing the career search. A recent survey of 98 people doing job development revealed too that 89% look to the want ads as a source for job openings, that 67% look specifically for jobs with repetitive tasks, and that 88% had recently sought employment for people in one of the major retail box stores in their community. These job search tactics are relics from a bygone age and do nothing to compliment or augment individualized employment (Griffin, 2011).

By thinking through the theme a bit, supported by DPG evidence of current skills, tasks that can potentially be taught/learned, and interests, as well as work environments that make sense, a broader and richer palette of opportunity emerges. By slowing down the process just a bit; engaging a team for ideas; and exploring the community using informational interviews and work try-outs (Griffin, Hammis & Geary, 2007), creative options emerge. And while none of us will ever be well versed in the intricacies of even a minuscule number of companies in our communities, the good news is that skills and tasks often transcend industry sectors. Someone who can wash a dish can also wash a car part in a solvent tank. DPG gets us to look in myriad places where similar skills and ecological fitment are found.

So, someone who helps their parents grow flowers in the family garden demonstrates that they know how to water the flowers, how to prune back dead leaves, and how to hoe weeds. This might mean, although additional Discovery is warranted, that there is an Agricultural Theme. This is not a flower or a plant theme; that would be far too narrow. The same skills used in flower gardening are used across many types of agriculture (and within other themes too). The flower garden, after all, is likely the only place the opportunity to learn and perform these tasks has occurred. In fact, DPG challenges us to consider that this might not be an interest of the person at all. Perhaps this is just one of the only activities accessible to the individual. Still, the skills they have (watering,

weeding, trimming) are relevant in many work environments and should not be dismissed. The DPG process helps determine where both interests and skills lie. And often employment is secured during Discovery when the themes are just emerging. Just be aware that accepting any job that's offered or appears a match too early in the process can jeopardize lasting success.

If Agriculture is indeed determined to be a theme through various DPG activities (e.g. a positive work try-out on a weeding team at the Botanical Gardens; a brief experience trimming trees with the local Parks Dept.), then a List of Twenty is developed. These lists compile places "where the career makes sense;" local companies where people who also have agriculture-related skills and interests work. This provides a multitude of options for job development, or the creation of internships and apprenticeships. Developing the List of Twenty is difficult, especially in smaller towns. This difficulty mandates creativity and exploration of one's community, especially since the work options must be accessible to the individual and be non-redundant in nature. A general rule is no more than 2 similar businesses on a List of Twenty. But think of the robust options available with the Lists of Twenty, versus thinking of the 2 or 3 jobs we typically link with gardening, and how this process becomes easier as the hidden commerce of the community is revealed.

Certainly no one will come close to visiting all 60 businesses, either. Generally it's recommended to formally visit a couple from each List using informational interviews, or get insights into a few via connections to folks who work in these companies, or through leveraging the social and economic capital of an agency's staff, Board, or supply chain. If employment is not secured, certainly a deeper knowledge of which theme is strongest generally occurs and further focuses the job development effort. Typically, the Lists of Twenty grow through just a little exploration. Business owners refer job developers and employment seekers to others in their networks as well. The point is that the abundance of options yields more creative job development, when tied to advanced job creation and coaching skills.

A List of Twenty for the Agriculture Theme might include: the local feed mill or grain elevator, a ranch or dairy farm, the local Bureau of Land Management Soil Testing Laboratory, a neighborhood grocery store, an office-plant maintenance company, the airport where crop dusters operate, a natural vitamin supplement processor, etc. We will need to know about the individual's environmental fit, their skills, and their interests to make the best match, but the Theme opens up the potential for a match beyond simply guessing at job descriptions or search the help wanted section on Craigslist. A quick study of Agriculture reveals links to possible exploration of careers relating to such far-flung employment sectors as: animals, cooking and food production, decorating and design, soil chemistry and conservation, machine maintenance and meteorology, et al. Since the best way to get a good idea is to get lots of ideas, developing the themes is a keystone task.

Because all people have complex lives and are adaptable to varied situations, it is recommended that at least 3 Vocational Themes be identified before moving into job development (or small business creation). Why three? First, because one theme is never

enough to anchor job development efforts and often represents the most obvious of ideas. Two themes still means there's only one hardy theme. Three seems to work well, and gives vocational teams the diversity and depth-of-thought to move beyond stereotypical employment.

Three themes also allows for mixing and matching. So, taking the agricultural theme and combining it with a mathematical theme replete with such skills as: being able to calculate a ball player's batting average; being able to add numbers on a desk calculator; being able to read digital and analog scales may yield some interesting businesses to explore. Any business engaged in agriculture deals with mathematics on some level. They are buying and selling, they are weighing, they are bagging, they are projecting, they are taking measured samples, they are selling by the dozen, the gross or the hundredweight, etc. The point is that until these companies are explored the actual existing or potentially created jobs are unknown. Perhaps there are opportunities at the local ketchup factory where trucks roll across the scales full, then empty to determine the value of the tomatoes they brought in; perhaps bagging and weighing seeds at the local plant nursery; measuring out how much fertilizer is mixed with water in a 500 gallon tank.

Conclusion

There is far more commerce in even the tiniest of towns than any one person can know. By using the Discovering Personal Genius (DPG) approach, individual profiles that guide career design are articulated. The development of the Three Vocational Themes helps signal the culmination of the assessment milestone and the natural commencement of work development. The themes work to satisfy funders looking for solid measures of activity, and the Lists of Twenty provide a more robust and measureable job development plan than is typical. The process informs staff of the breadth of business activity in a community, and builds their data repository so essential to serving future employment seekers who need adventurous and engaging jobs as much as anyone.

References

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