

Research Supporting Competitive, Integrated Employment

Competitive, integrated employment (CIE) – working in the community, alongside people with and without disabilities, at competitive wages – offers a direct pathway to greater independence and self-sufficiency for people with disabilities.

CIE is defined as work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is compensated at a rate not less than minimum wage (*Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*, Public Law 113–128). CIE also incorporates work where the employee with a disability interacts with other persons who are not individuals with disabilities and where opportunities for advancement are similar (*Ibid.*). The benefits for CIE workers include improved earnings, wages, or salaries when compared to peers who worked in segregated workplaces (Taylor, et al., 2021a). Moreover, CIE was associated with positive psychological and physical health outcomes as well as improvements in self-determination, independence, and quality of life for people with significant disabilities (*Ibid.*).

However, people with disabilities – particularly people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) – often face barriers to employment. These barriers include lack of access to the support they need to find a job and succeed in the workplace, lack of employer awareness of the benefits of recruiting and retaining people with disabilities, and misunderstandings about the cost of providing accommodations, to name just a few. Further, although CIE is the preferred option for people with significant disabilities (Migliore et al., 2007; Rogan & Rinne, 2011; Wehman et al., 2018), people with ID/DD often have been steered to sheltered workshops and other programs that employ *only* people with disabilities, at sub-minimum wages, under certificates issued by the Department of Labor in accordance with Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The Administration for Community Living is working to dismantle these and other common barriers and to expand employment opportunities for people with

disabilities. In addition to funding programs that provide direct employment support services to people with disabilities and advocating for policies and practices that prioritize and support CIE as a key element of community living, ACL also is investing in research to increase knowledge about the benefits of employment of people with disabilities – both for the individual and for the employer – and to increase the availability of effective interventions to support employment.

CIE is increasingly becoming the expectation across the country. Ten states have or will phase out use of 14(c) labor certificates and 11 other states have pending legislation targeting similar outcomes (Association of People Supporting Employment First, 2022). As progress occurs toward eliminating 14(c) programs, research about CIE is more important than ever to highlight what is known, what challenges exist, and what still needs to be explored. Further, as sheltered workshops are phased out, it is important that states and employment systems build capacity to support CIE (Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities, 2016). To support that capacity-building, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) has also funded several projects that focus specifically on competitive, integrated employment for people with significant disabilities.

Customized Employment

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is studying customized employment as an intervention to assist individuals with intellectual disabilities and/or autism spectrum disorder to achieve integrated employment outcomes (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2022). [Customized employment](#) is a process for individualizing the employment relationship between a job seeker and an employer based on a match between the unique strengths, needs, and interests of the job candidate with a disability, and the identified business needs of

the employer (Riesen et al., 2019). Components of customized employment include: 1) exploration and discovery; 2) customized planning for guiding the job search; and 3) job negotiations that establish a customized relationship between the employer and employee (Inge et al., 2018; Federal Register, 2002). Customized employment may also be integrated with ongoing, supported employment services that help workers with the most significant disabilities maintain employment.

An early exploratory study of autistic individuals who participated in a customized employment program showed that all 64 workers obtained employment, and that supports were successfully reduced over time (Wehman, et al., 2016). The study reported that this was the first employment experience for most of the workers, a relevant point when considering former 14(c) participants who may also have limited or no experience in integrated settings. Limitations were that the study was a retrospective review only and did not include a control group. That is, customized employment took place before the study was initiated, and autistic participants were not selected on a randomized basis. The level of evidence was therefore not as strong as would be available through a randomized, control trial intervention.

To examine the effectiveness of customized employment further, the five-year VCU project included the following:

- Operationalizing the term “customized employment” as an evidence-based practice using a survey of employment specialists conducted to clarify the essential components of customized employment – what it is and is not – which created a consistent starting point for researchers.
- A randomized control trial to evaluate the employment outcomes of individuals who received customized employment services as compared to a control group.
- Knowledge translation activities, including outreach to vocational rehabilitation professionals, to facilitate implementation of customized employment as an evidence-based practice.

The intervention demonstrated success. Predictive statistical analyses of the first three cohorts showed that

a final planned cohort would most likely achieve a similar positive outcome. Therefore, ethical considerations led VCU to suspend the randomized control trial and expand the intervention to include both treatment and control groups in the final year. Results of this study are expected to be published later this year.

Evaluating Return on Investment for Supporting CIE

NIDILRR-supported research also has looked at return-on-investment and cost-benefits of CIE. Dean, et al. (2015) examined vocational rehabilitation and other administrative data to study short- and long-term employment impacts for people with cognitive impairments who applied for vocational rehabilitation services in Virginia. Econometric modeling incorporated labor market data and allowed for analyses based on different vocational rehabilitation service options. The authors found that vocational rehabilitation services generally provided positive long-run labor market outcome effects that appeared to substantially exceed the cost of providing services. That is, for people with cognitive impairments, the mean five-year benefits of \$21,175 exceeded the mean costs of vocational rehabilitation services by four to six times (Ibid., 2015).

A more recent scoping review by [Taylor, et al. \(2021b\)](#) analyzed and synthesized micro and macroeconomic analyses of vocational services for people with ID/DD. Most of the 26 studies reviewed reported that the benefits of customized and supported employment within integrated work settings exceeded costs. The authors found no studies that showed similar positive cost-benefit ratios for 14(c) sheltered workshops and, in some cases, the costs of sheltered work exceeded the benefits.

The authors concluded the study with a call to action: “There remains a critical need to close the gap as youth with [ID/DD] transition from school to adulthood and ensure that all are set on a seamless trajectory to CIE. Although a reform of this magnitude may come at considerable cost, it is important to evaluate continued inaction in contrast to the invisible cost of lost talent if another generation of individuals with [ID/DD] continues to receive the same outcomes” (Ibid., p. 204).

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