

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Is customized employment real for your high-support-needs adult?

It is promoted specifically for people most affected by disability. A 2023 review found eighteen studies and zero randomized trials. Here is what the evidence supports and what it does not.

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RANDOMIZED TRIALS

Across eighteen peer-reviewed customized employment studies reviewed in 2023.

How customized employment works

DISCOVERY TO SUPPORT

STAGE 1

Discovery

Instead of assessing whether a person fits an existing job, a specialist spends weeks documenting what the person can do, likes, and needs.



STAGE 2

Negotiation

The provider approaches an employer with unmet needs and negotiates a job description built from tasks nobody currently has time for.



STAGE 3

Support

A job coach supports the placement. How long that lasts, and who pays after VR closes the case, is the whole question.

Deciding whether this fits your family

THE FUNDING QUESTION FIRST

Before you spend a year on Discovery

This is one of the few honest questions in adult services where no may be the right answer. The fork below turns on funding, not on expectations.

Does a funded source of ongoing job coaching exist after Vocational Rehabilitation closes the case, and has a local provider placed someone at your adult child's support level?

Yes, and support needs are stable rather than escalating.

Worth a serious year. Reported placements ran 15 to 28 hours per week at wages above minimum, and demonstration projects reported a 44.8% placement rate. Get the provider's own numbers in writing first.

No, or no provider has placed at this support level.

Customized employment becomes a well-designed process that ends at a cliff. Declining is not low expectations. Spend the year on housing, guardianship alternatives, or building a day that works.

18

Peer-reviewed studies total

Ten from a 2015 review plus eight published between 2015 and 2021. Predominantly descriptive.

44.8%

Reported placement rate

Across federally funded demonstration projects. One produced 287 placements from 475 participants.

2.00

Expert evidence rating

Out of 5. The same experts rated relevance 4.19. Promising, not proven.

THE JOB THAT GOT BUILT, AND THE COACH WHO LEFT

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Marisol's brother Andre was placed at a hospital laundry, eighteen hours a week, sorting by color and weight. It worked for fourteen months. Then Vocational Rehabilitation closed the case as a successful outcome and the job coach hours ended. Andre lasted five weeks.

THE PLACEMENT WAS NEVER THE HARD PART.

THE TAKEAWAY

The honest question is not whether customized employment works. It is whether your state has a funded pathway for indefinite job coaching after VR closes the case. Ask that before Discovery starts, not fourteen months in.

TURN THE PAGE

The numbers to demand from any provider, the signs it may fit, and what to insist on regardless of what you decide.

Screening a customized employment provider

ASK FOR NUMBERS, NOT PHILOSOPHY

OUTCOMES

Their numbers, in writing

- ☐ How many people did you place last year?
- ☐ How many are still employed twelve months later?
- ☐ What was the average weekly hours?
- ☐ What is the highest support level you have placed?
- ☐ A good provider has these and shares them

FUNDING

The question that decides it

- ☐ Who funds Discovery, and for how many hours?
- ☐ What happens when VR closes the case?
- ☐ Can Medicaid fund ongoing job coaching here?
- ☐ Is there a waiver slot or a waiting list involved?
- ☐ We will figure that out is an answer, and it is no

FIT

Signs it may work

- ☐ Specific repeatable skills, even narrow ones
- ☐ Tolerates a predictable environment and routine
- ☐ Support needs stable rather than escalating
- ☐ Transportation is solvable in your area
- ☐ Part-time hours would be a gain, not a disruption

PROTECT

Whatever you decide

- ☐ Do not let employment be the only plan goal
- ☐ Require a funded day while Discovery runs
- ☐ Ask for two family references and call them
- ☐ Ask what year two looked like for those families
- ☐ Get the whole answer in writing before starting

BRING ONE PAGE, NOT A BINDER

The provider screening sheet

01

Placements

Number placed last year, and twelve-month retention.

02

Support level

The highest support level they have successfully placed.

03

Funding after VR

Named source of ongoing job coaching, or none.

04

References

Two families at a similar support level, with numbers.

YOUR MOVE

Deciding without being talked into it

1

Get their numbers

Placements, retention, hours, support level.

2

Ask who pays after

Ongoing job coaching, named funding source.

3

Call two families

Ask what year two actually looked like.

4

Decide out loud

Yes or no, and put the reason in the plan.

5

Fill the day

Name a funded service while the process runs.

Expectations are not the variable in short supply here. Funded job coaching hours are. Saying no to a maybe is not giving up on your adult child.

SOURCES

Riesen T, Snyder A, Byers R, Keeton B, Inge K. An updated review of the customized employment literature. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 2023;58:27-38.

Inge KJ, Sima AP, Riesen T, Wehman P, Brooks-Lane N. The Essential Elements of Customized Employment: Results From a National Survey of Employment Providers. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*. 2023.

Virginia Commonwealth University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment for People with Disabilities. Customized employment research collection, vcurrtrc.org.

National Disability Institute. Discovery and Customized Employment resources.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.