

Integrating customized employment practices within the vocational rehabilitation system

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: In April 2009, the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities (FCIC) conducted a two-day training on the Discovery process for the Brevard County School System as part of the Supported, Competitive, Integrated Employment Training Teams (SCIETT) project. The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) representatives at the training came up with a plan to integrate Discovery into the public VR system. They presented the information to the State VR office and requested support to conduct a pilot project to test the feasibility of this idea.

OBJECTIVE: This article describes a systems change project initiated by the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) to build the capacity of the public VR system to effectively serve individuals with complex disabilities by adding Discovery, a component of the customized employment process, as an alternative to traditional vocational evaluation.

CONCLUSION: A collaborative effort between Florida VR, Marc Gold & Associates, Southeast TACE, and the University of South Florida resulted in a certification process to train community-based providers to provide Discovery as a billable service for VR customers who have not been successful in obtaining competitive, integrated employment through traditional strategies. The article includes an overview of this innovative project and lessons learned to assist other states and communities in replicating the process.

Keywords: Disability, customized employment, discovery, systems change

1. Introduction

In July 2014, President Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which supersedes the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and amends the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, the Wagner-Peyser Act, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA will help job seekers and workers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and match employers with skilled workers that they need to com-

pete in a global economy (U.S. DOL, 2014). According to the Department of Labor, the majority of the provisions in the Act will become effective July 1, 2015 and the Act is authorized through 2020 (U.S. DOL, 2014).

Several provisions in WIOA are designed to improve services, supports, and access to employment for people, including those with disabilities. Section 511 of WIOA requires a series of activities to determine whether an individual with a disability is eligible for public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and whether the individual is able to work in an integrated setting. The provision limits the use of segregated settings that pay subminimum wage. This is a step in the right direction for advocates of Employment First. Employment First is a declaration of both philosophy and policy stating that employment is the first priority

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and preferred outcome for people with disabilities (Niemic, Lavin, & Owens, 2009).

Another provision defines *competitive integrated employment* as full or part time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with co-workers without disabilities (Hoff, 2014). *Customized employment* is also defined as competitive integrated employment for an individual with a significant disability that is designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer and carried out through flexible strategies. As a result, customized employment is now listed as a VR service (Schroeder, 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the customized employment process.

For years, the benefits of utilizing customized employment strategies have been known by service providers and others supporting and advocating for employment for individuals with complex disabilities. Unfortunately, due to a lack of evidence-based research, access to these strategies has been limited to pilot projects and other small scale efforts designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the strategies. Results of these pilots have been unable to establish the strategies as evidence-based due to a lack of methodological rigor in the design and implementation and a common lack of a project evaluation.

Discovery is a component of the customized employment that is utilized to learn strengths, talents, and conditions for employment through interaction in natural

environments with the individual with a disability and those who know the person well (Callahan, Shumpert, & Condon, 2009). The strategy is typically used with people who do not do well with traditional vocational evaluation strategies that are often in prescribed settings and compare the person being evaluated to a normative sample. Too often, persons with complex disabilities are deemed “too significantly disabled” to benefit from public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services based on reports from vocational evaluators indicating that the person cannot work. VR also has a trial work option for applicants who need further evaluation, but this option is typically underused and it does not always consider the unique conditions necessary for the individual to be successful in an employment setting.

An example of a person who may benefit from Discovery is an individual with autism. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders, characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior (NINDS, 2014). Persons with autism may be resistant to change and may not be comfortable in offices or other unfamiliar settings. Sensitivity to stimuli may further this discomfort. Additionally, many people who have autism have issues with communication and some have limited or no speech. These characteristics may contribute to difficulties with traditional employment strategies, but do not indicate that the person does not have talents that can be translated into a work setting. Discovery is able to uncover these talents. The Discovery process results in a robust, narrative profile of the person that includes a translation of these talents into work settings in the person’s community. This strategy also considers natural support systems, transportation options, and workforce accommodations to promote successful employment and job retention. The purpose of this article is 1) to provide an overview of integrative customized employment practices implemented within the State of Florida Vocational Rehabilitation system and 2) to present lessons learned to assistance to other states and communities who may be interested in replicating the process.



Fig. 1. Customized employment process.

2. Background

In April 2009, the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities (FCIC) conducted a two-day training on the Discovery process for the Brevard County School System as part of the Supported, Competitive, Integrated

Employment Training Teams (SCIETT) project (Smith, Clark, & Dileo, 2009). As a Community Action Team project, stakeholders in surrounding communities were invited to attend. An Area Administrator from the State Vocational Rehabilitation system and one of his employees attended the training. At the end of the training, participants from each of the surrounding communities were asked to form small groups to brainstorm and record action steps for bring Discovery to their communities. The VR representatives came up with a plan to integrate Discovery into the public VR system. They presented the information to the State VR office and requested support to conduct a pilot project to test the feasibility of this idea.

The VR representatives congregated a workgroup consisting of the State VR Supported Employment Administrator, the Director of Southeast TACE, national experts from Marc Gold & Associates (developers of the Discovery process), and the FCIC trainer at the University of South Florida. The workgroup convened via multiple conference calls to brainstorm methods to implement a process for training community-based service vendors to provide Discovery as a billable service for Vocational Rehabilitation.

3. Pilots

Two pilot programs were conducted to test the feasibility of a Discovery certification program for community-based service providers who are vendors for the Florida VR program. The first pilot began in November 2011 and was offered in face-to-face format. A national Discovery expert from Marc Gold & Associates was contracted to travel to central Florida to provide training to sixteen participants. Although the initial pilot was successful with eleven participants successfully completing the training and becoming certified to provide Discovery as a billable service for VR, the model was not sustainable due to travel and training costs. Additionally, some of the participants had to drop out of the training due, in part, to lack of flexibility in their schedules that impacted their ability to attend the training meetings. Another issue that led to attrition is the high turnover rate in community rehabilitation settings.

The workgroup reconvened to brainstorm alternate options. It was determined that a web-based training utilizing Adobe Connect software may be more accessible to participants. In June 2012, the second pilot began. This pilot trained seven participants via weekly 90 minute online meetings where content was presented

and participants were able to ask questions and receive feedback from the course's two instructors. Assignments that led to the development of a vocational profile were incorporated into the course. Participants worked with real job seekers who were referred through their agencies. Instructors guided course participants as they applied their learning.

The online pilot was also successful, but it was learned that supervisors who do not provide direct-service to job seekers did not have the time to complete the experiential component of the course. Also, those who were instructed to take the course by their employer, but did not have intrinsic motivation to complete the course and those who seemed to be entrenched in traditional vocational evaluation methods required much more technical assistance from the instructors to apply Discovery with fidelity to the model.

Through what was learned during the second pilot, the workgroup further refined the course using a hybrid model. The model includes online, on-demand course content that does not require the participant to attend weekly web-based meetings. The experiential component of the course was revised to utilize Discovery Stewards to provide individual technical assistance to course participants. This option allows for a higher level of technical assistance and incorporates methods to promote fidelity to the Discovery model.

4. Course modules

Six course modules were developed to provide the content of the course. The first module includes basic information about the course and foundational knowledge about the customized employment process. Modules two through six include instructional content and case examples to assist course participants in understanding the Discovery process and how the information collected through Discovery translates to a real world setting. Modules contain a short quiz to assess learning. The modules must be taken in order and the participant must score 80% or higher on the unit quiz to be able to access the next module. The modules are supplemented by a course web page that contains supplemental materials, course manuals, profile templates and samples, and other information related to the course content. A seventh module is also accessible through the course web page to assist participants in transitioning to the next phase of the customized employment process – the customized planning meeting.

5. Experiential component

During the first week of the course, the lead course instructor and the lead Steward facilitate a web-based Meet and Greet session to orient participants, introduce and assign Stewards, and address any questions that the participants may have about the course. This session is also utilized to cover roles, responsibilities and expectations. Also, during this initial meeting, participants are introduced to course materials, time logs, and the course web page. Contact information is provided so that technical assistance is readily available to course participants.

Stewards are highly trained Discovery experts who are experienced in providing training and technical assistance to ensure that the strategy is implemented with fidelity to the model. Each Steward works with 2–6 course participants per 14 week term. During the course, Stewards are available via email and scheduled phone calls to provide technical assistance and support to their assigned participants. Individual technical assistance is provided on an as-needed basis and is initiated by the course participant.

Group technical assistance is provided via four web-based meetings utilizing Adobe Connect software. The group calls are scheduled at the onset of the course and are mandatory. Exceptions are made on a case-by-case basis and require the participant to view the recorded session. Each of the group calls coincides with a section of the vocational profile and is utilized to provide feedback to participants on their progress and to address questions. These group calls are essential to ensuring that the participants are staying on task and on schedule with the course assignments and to promote quality and fidelity in the implementation of the Discovery process with a job seeker referred through VR.

In addition to technical assistance, Stewards review the vocational profiles developed by course participants during their work with the referred job seeker. Feedback is provided via track changes and the profiles are returned to participants for corrections. Typical corrections involve removing evaluative language, revisions to focus on the job seekers strengths and talents, and indications that more Discovery activity is needed to enrich the profile and make it more robust. Additionally, course participants are required to translate the information gathered through Discovery into meaningful employment options and opportunities that coincide with the job seeker's talents, skills, and conditions for employment. To successfully complete the course, participants must complete all course modules and produce

a quality vocational profile that is approved by the Steward.

6. Infrastructure, statewide expansion and sustainability

The workgroup spent much time on determining an infrastructure that would promote statewide access to the course and long-term sustainability. Each of the stakeholder groups has a specific role in the course. Figure 2 provides a process flow chart as a visual aid to the infrastructure and course process.

The University of South Florida (USF) provides the platform for course registration, fee payment, course coordination, and content delivery. USF also distributes certificate information for participants who pass the course and relays the information to VR. The course is set up as a non-degree seeking training through the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities within the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at USF. This allows participants to enroll without the need to be accepted as a student of the University. Payments are collected through a Touch Net system and assigned a budget chart field for distribution of royalties and payments for Stewards. It should be noted that this is a non-profit course for USF and is offered as part of the activities of the FCIC which is a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD).

The experiential component of the course is facilitated by the Discovery Stewards and is coordinated by Marc Gold & Associates (MGA). This allows MGA to recruit Stewards who are trained to apply Discovery with fidelity to the model. USF remits payment of collected course fees to MGA via purchase order to compensate for access to course materials including electronic course manuals, profile templates and other intellectual property. The payment includes funds to compensate Stewards for their work with course participants. This outsourcing allows MGA to manage the recruitment of Stewards which permits Stewards to be independent consultants rather than USF employees. This system removes many of the time consuming barriers that, if managed by USF internally, would make recruitment and retention of highly qualified Stewards difficult.

Vocational Rehabilitation is involved in the course at both the State and local level. Each of Florida VR's six areas has assigned a Discovery liaison to provide local level coordination. After USF has collected applications from potential course participants, the State VR

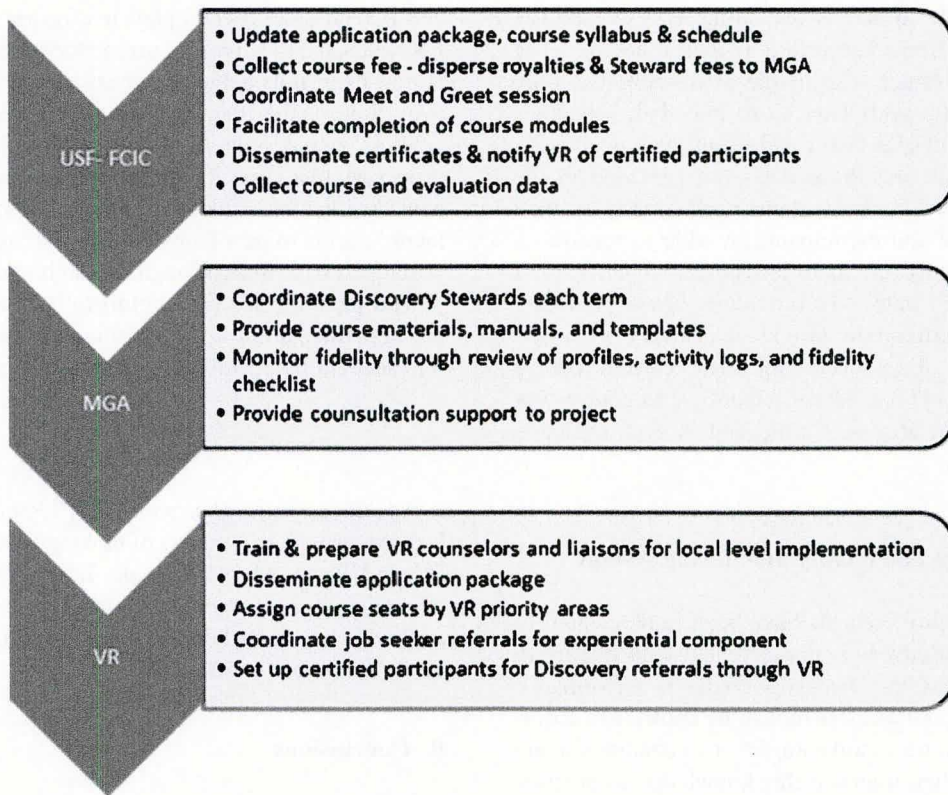


Fig. 2. Infrastructure and process flow.

lead and each of the area liaisons join the USF course lead on a conference call to review a spreadsheet that includes applicant information. To be considered for a course seat, applicants must be current supported employment vendors for VR. This promotes continued service provision once the Discovery process is completed. Course seats are assigned based upon agency priorities to build capacity. The course is offered three times per year and seats 15–24 participants contingent upon the availability of Stewards.

Once seat assignments are determined, VR conducts mandatory vendor screening and informs the USF instructor when participants are cleared to begin the course. The instructor then sends the payment link to course participants and, upon payment, the course materials and module access is provided. VR then works at the local level to match course participants with VR customers/job seekers who qualify for the Discovery service. The VR counselor makes the referral to the course participant during week 3–4 of the course. This allows the participant to gain a foundational knowledge of Discovery prior to beginning to apply the strategy

with the job seeker. Once a participant successfully completes the course, the State VR office enters the provider into the system as a certified Discovery vendor and the course participant can bill for the profile that was developed during the course. This allows for an immediate return on investment for the course participants. The course fee is currently \$875. Florida VR has established a fee code for the Discovery service, which is linked to supported employment services, that pays certified vendors \$1750 for an approved vocational profile. Certified vendors can also be compensated for up to 15 additional hours of direct Discovery activities with the job seeker if necessary to develop a robust profile. The rate for these additional hours is \$39 per hour. The minimum time in Discovery activities prior to approval of additional compensated hours is 19 hours. It is expected that the vendor will continue to work with the job seeker through the customized planning process and job placement. These services are compensated separately.

The design and infrastructure of the Discovery course allows for statewide access and sustainability. Partic-

Participants are able to access the online course modules (content) on-demand according to their schedules. The technical assistance is available as needed. The only time that participants have to fit into their schedules is for the Meet and Greet and group technical assistance meetings and those dates are provided in the application. The course sustains itself fiscally through the course fee and participants are able to receive an immediate return on their investment at the end of the course. To date, 51 community-based providers have been certified to provide Discovery as a billable service for Florida VR. The current course term (Fall 2014) has 23 participants. The course was rolled out one area at a time and is now available statewide.

7. Evaluation and quality monitoring system

Several quality controls have been implemented to ensure that Discovery is implemented with fidelity to the model. First, the Discovery course is performance based. Participants must demonstrate knowledge acquisition through successful completion of content module quizzes and then translate this knowledge to practice through applying Discovery with a real job seeker who is referred through VR. Highly trained Discovery Stewards provide mentoring and guidance throughout the experiential component of the class and process checklists are utilized to ensure that the model is implemented with fidelity. Course participants must spend a minimum of 19 hours in direct service Discovery activities with the job seeker to gather the information necessary to develop a robust vocational profile. Stewards review profiles and activity logs to ensure that all elements are completed and that the profile contains information that is sufficient to begin the customized employment planning process.

During the pilots, pre and post survey data was collected to assess the participants' baseline knowledge of Discovery and their self-reported gains in knowledge obtained through participation in the course. One hundred percent of participants reported a significant increase in Discovery knowledge and application skill level at the end of the course. Additionally, the survey data indicated a shift in philosophical attitudes pertaining to the belief that all people have talents that can be translated to work with the proper supports in place.

The Discovery workgroup has suggested the incorporation of a recertification process that would require

certified providers to complete a refresher module after two years and to submit a current vocational profile for review to ensure quality and consistency remains intact over time. After the first successful recertification, vendors would only need to go through recertification every five years. In addition to continuous quality controls, the recertification process also allows for incorporation of new knowledge and strategies that are developed over time through research and demonstration projects. Florida VR administrators are considering the implementation of a recertification process taking into account the recommendations of the workgroup.

8. Lessons learned

As with any new endeavor, many lessons have been learned through the process of making Discovery available to VR customers in Florida. Table 1 provides a list of challenges encountered and solutions that have been applied throughout the development and improvement of the Discovery course.

9. Conclusions

As customized employment strategies are incorporated into Workforce laws, more and more states will be looking for ways to incorporate these strategies into their public and private vocational rehabilitation systems. The information provided in this article may serve as a model for replication and the lessons learned may help other states to avoid or prepare for challenges that arise whenever an innovative practice of this magnitude is implemented. It should be noted that Discovery is the first step in the customized employment process and that service providers also need to be trained to utilize customized planning and placement strategies. Discovery provides a foundation for employment planning, but is not designed to result in employment when used as an independent strategy.

Future research with rigorous methodological design is needed to establish customized employment strategies as evidence-based. This evidence will facilitate the creation of funding streams for integration of these strategies into vocational rehabilitation systems. The ultimate goal is to increase the availability of quality services, supports, and opportunities for individuals with complex disabilities who wish to work, but have not been successful through traditional service options.

Table 1
Lessons learned: Challenges and solutions

Challenge	Solutions
All VR counselors, supervisors, liaisons, and staff need to be trained in Discovery and aware of the certificate course and implementation efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State VR office developed online, on-demand training for VR employees. • Supplemental information and training is provided periodically. • Area liaisons with a comprehensive understanding of Discovery were appointed to provide technical assistance and support to VR staff and vendors.
Community-based provider supervisors who do not provide direct services, but need to learn about the Discovery process do not have the time to complete the full course.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors are offered a content only option at a reduced course fee. This option does not result in certification and does not include the experiential component of the course.
Vocational profiles did not always reflect a strength-based, robust, narrative snapshot of the job seeker and demonstrated weak translation of talents, skills, and conditions to employment opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicants must provide a writing sample with the application so that basic grammar and writing style can be assessed. • When necessary, writing workshops are recommended. • Participants are given feedback and opportunities to revise and correct issues identified in the vocational profile.
Once certified, vendors were not receiving referrals from their local VR offices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR began internal promotion of Discovery as a service option for individuals with complex disabilities who have not become employed through traditional strategies. • This promotion includes formal communications, success stories, and mandatory training.
Discovery takes more time than traditional vocational evaluation strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR compensates certified providers at a competitive rate to account for the time and effort required to implement Discovery with fidelity to the model. • Participants are informed in advance that the course will require approximately 8 hours per week over 14 weeks and that more time may be required based on the complexity of the individual job seeker. • Job seekers are informed of the time commitment required to complete the Discovery process and that the resulting profile aids in customized planning and job placement and not direct and immediate employment. It is the first step in the customized employment process.
Need to facilitate a strong and seamless transition from Discovery to additional customized and supported employment services necessary for successful job placement and retention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VR only awards seats in the Discovery course to current VR vendors who provide supported employment services. • Course participants are informed that it is expected that they will continue working with the job seeker after the Discovery process is completed and through job placement and successful VR closure.
The customized planning meeting should take place within a couple of weeks after the completion of the Discovery process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course participants are provided with a seventh course module to guide them in coordinating and conducting the customized planning meeting. • VR counselors and other stakeholders (family, significant others, providers, etc.) are invited to attend the planning meeting and informed of their role in the planning process. • The job seeker is empowered to self-direct his/her employment plan and must be in attendance at the planning meeting.
Recertification or continuing education process needs to be in place to ensure that quality services continue to be delivered to VR customers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The State Discovery Workgroup developed a recertification process and strategy for maintaining fidelity and quality. • State VR administrators are evaluating options for implementing recertification for Discovery and other internal certification programs.

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