Customised Employment: A Comprehensive Guide for Disability Support Providers

Customised Employment (CE) is a person-centred approach that creates meaningful, sustainable work opportunities for people with disability. Unlike traditional employment models, which focus on filling vacancies and filtering candidates through competitive open recruitment processes, CE begins with the individual. It asks: *What are this person's unique strengths, contributions, and ideal conditions?* Then it asks of employers: *What unmet needs exist in this business, and how could this person address them?*

The result is a negotiated role that benefits both the jobseeker and the employer, leading to valued roles, inclusion, and long-term success.

This guide has been developed for support providers, coordinators, and families to build a clearer understanding of Customised Employment (CE). While the CE model was first developed in the 1980s, its implementation in Australia is still relatively new. We recognise that this means there is a period of education needed across the sector, so stakeholders can better understand what CE is and how it works. There are also many other employment supports and programs — such as Disability Employment Services (DES) and Skilling Queenslanders for Work — which can sometimes be confused with CE.

How CE is Different

The key difference is that programs like DES work by matching people to existing vacancies in the open labour market, while CE begins with the individual. CE focuses on uncovering a person's unique strengths, interests, and conditions for success, and then works with employers to create or negotiate a role that is customised. This approach means opportunities are not limited to jobs already advertised, but instead are built to bring out the best in both the jobseeker and the business.

Most employment services will start by asking, "What do you want to do?" At first, this sounds like the obvious place to begin. However, in Customised Employment we take a different approach. We don't rely on that single question, because it can limit people to very narrow options or to roles they already know about. This does not mean we ignore the jobseeker's voice — in fact, their interests, strengths, and preferences are at the centre of everything we do. Instead of narrowing choices too early, we focus on uncovering multiple interests and contributions. This opens up far more possibilities and creates opportunities with many different types of employers, rather than just one or two jobs that first come to mind.

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We want stakeholders to understand the Customised Employment process because questions will naturally arise and, at times, confusion can occur. For example, it is common for families to ask, "Why aren't you looking for jobs straight away for my son, daughter, or the participant?" This is an understandable question, given that most people's experience of job seeking has always begun with scanning job ads and approaching employers directly. However, in Customised Employment we do not 'jump straight in' to contacting employers. Instead, we follow a trusted, evidence-based framework that ensures the job seeker is well understood first, and that the opportunities pursued are both meaningful for the individual and beneficial for the employer

For disability support providers, understanding the process of Customised Employment is critical. It ensures that staff can implement the model effectively, advocate for participants, and promote CE as a pathway to genuine participation in community and economic life.

State 1 Discovery:

Discovery is a structured, strengths-based process of learning who a person is and what they can contribute to the world of work. It is the essential first step of Customised Employment and the foundation upon which all later planning and negotiation is built.

What Discovery Produces

The outcome of Discovery is not a "score" or "assessment report" but a rich narrative profile of the person. This includes:

- Identified vocational themes.
- A description of strengths, contributions, and conditions for success.
- A list of potential support strategies.
- Examples and evidence of where these strengths have been observed in real life.

This narrative forms the foundation of the Customised Plan for Employment (CPE).

The Nature of Discovery

- **Exploratory, not evaluative**: Discovery is not about measuring a person against standards or scoring them on employability. Instead, it uncovers *authentic information* about their strengths, interests, conditions for success, and potential contributions.
- **Strengths-focused**: It deliberately looks past deficits and barriers to identify what the person *can do* and where they can shine.
- **Contextual**: Discovery is carried out in everyday environments — at home, in the community, while doing hobbies, volunteering, or socialising — because this is where genuine abilities are most visible and we can see them at their best and identify their contributions, interests and conditions

Core Areas of Discovery

1. **Contributions**
    - Natural abilities (e.g., attention to detail, manual dexterity, artistic expression).
    - Skills learned informally (e.g., cooking at home, using technology, gardening).
    - Functional capacities observed in daily routines.
    - The unique ways the individual can add value to a workplace.
    - Contributions are framed positively (e.g., "consistent and reliable with routine tasks" instead of "can only do repetitive tasks").
    - Focus on what the person *gives* to an employer, not what they *need*.

2. **Interests and Motivations**
    - Activities that the person is naturally drawn to or excited about.
    - Interests that could form the basis of vocational themes.
    - Indicators of motivation (what keeps them engaged, what sparks joy).
3. **Ideal Conditions for Success**
    - Environmental factors (quiet or busy, structured or flexible, indoors or outdoors).
    - Social factors (working alone, in pairs, or in groups).
    - Learning style (hands-on demonstration, visual aids, written instructions).
    - Sensory or physical considerations (lighting, noise, pace, physical activity).

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4. **Support Needs and Strategies**
    - Specific supports that make tasks possible or easier (communication aids, mobility supports, coaching).
    - Preferred teaching methods or adaptations.
    - Natural supports already present in their life (family, friends, mentors).

Stage 2: Job Development

Job Development in Customised Employment is a structured, business-focused process of identifying and engaging employers, analysing their unmet needs, and preparing the ground for negotiation. It transforms the jobseeker's contributions into concrete opportunities and ensures that both the person and the business benefit from the match.

It is the stage where employment specialists actively identify and approach potential employers, guided by the vocational themes, contributions, and conditions uncovered during Discovery.

Unlike traditional job searching — which focuses on finding an open vacancy and seeing if a jobseeker can "fit" it — Job Development in Customised Employment is proactive, creative, and relational. It is about **matching the individual's contributions to an employer's unmet needs** and building opportunities that may not yet exist.

Activities Involved in Job Development

1. Researching Potential Employers

- Identifying businesses aligned with the vocational themes and conditions documented in the Customised Plan for Employment.
- Gathering background information about their operations, staffing, culture, and potential unmet needs.
- Prioritising businesses where a strong "mutual fit" seems likely.

2. Preparing Employer Engagement Tools

- Visual Résumés: Showcasing the jobseeker's strengths in a simple, visual way.
- Concept Portfolios: Presenting a tailored case for how the jobseeker's contributions align with the business's needs.
- Talking Points: Clear, strengths-focused messages to guide conversations with employers.

3. Initial Employer Contact

- Approaching employers in a professional, collaborative manner.
- Framing the conversation around the business's operations and needs, not the disability of the candidate.
- Listening as much as talking, to learn about the employer's priorities.

4. Conducting Employer Needs–Benefits Analysis (ENBA)

- Visiting the workplace to observe how tasks are performed.
- Identifying pain points, inefficiencies, or gaps that could be addressed by carving or creating a role.
- Discussing with managers and staff what tasks are left undone or are diverting skilled workers from their primary duties.

5. Identifying Potential Matches

- Comparing the jobseeker's contributions and ideal conditions with the business's unmet needs.
- Documenting possible ways the individual could add value to the workplace.

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Stage 3: Job Negotiation

Job Negotiation is the stage of Customised Employment where providers and employers co-create a tailored role. It is built on Discovery and Job Development, framed around mutual benefit, and designed to produce sustainable, valued employment outcomes

Job Negotiation is the stage where the employment specialist works collaboratively with an employer to design or carve a role that aligns with both the jobseeker's contributions (from Discovery and the Customised Plan for Employment) and the employer's identified needs (from Job Development and the Employer Needs–Benefits Analysis).
Unlike traditional employment negotiations, which focus on salary and conditions for an existing vacancy, Customised Employment negotiation is about creating or restructuring a role. It's a problem-solving process where both sides shape the job so that:

- The employer gets value (efficiency, cost savings, productivity).
- The jobseeker secures a meaningful and sustainable role.

As we say if its not a win for everyone than its not a win for anyone!

1. Presenting Customised Options
Together, the employer and employment specialist explore practical ways to design or adapt a role. This might involve:

- Job carving is reassigning certain tasks from existing staff into a new, focused role.
- Job creation is developing a new position around previously unmet needs.
- Scheduling adjustments is designing hours or shifts that work for both the business and the individual.
- Support strategies is clarifying how training or on-the-job support will be provided.

2. Addressing Questions and Concerns
Employers naturally want assurance that the arrangement will be sustainable. During negotiation, issues such as productivity, training, supervision, and support are openly discussed. The provider explains what resources are available — such as job coaching, assistive technology, or natural supports within the workplace — to ensure success.
3. Agreement and Next Steps
Once both sides are confident, the customised role is formalised. This includes documenting the duties, work hours, supports in place, and any agreed timelines for review. By the end of negotiation, both the jobseeker and the employer have clarity about expectations and supports.

Job Negotiation is critical because it transforms the planning and preparation of earlier stages into concrete employment outcomes. It ensures that:

- The individual secures a role built around their contributions and conditions for success.
- The employer benefits from a tailored solution to their business needs.
- The provider demonstrates professionalism and builds long-term partnerships with local businesses.

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Stage 4 Post Placement Support

Post Placement Support is the stage that begins after the individual has been hired. It ensures that both the employee and the employer are supported during the transition period, and that the employment relationship is sustainable in the long term.

Unlike traditional support models, Post Placement Support in Customised Employment is not just about "checking in." It is an intentional process of understanding how the workplace operates, embedding natural supports, and gradually reducing reliance on external assistance

1. Workplace Discovery (Job Analysis)

Once the individual starts their role, the employment specialist spends time in the workplace to learn its **culture, routines, and natural ways of working**. This includes:

- Observing how tasks are really carried out (often different from formal job descriptions).
- Understanding communication styles, social norms, and team dynamics.
- Identifying potential "natural supports" — colleagues who can mentor or guide the new employee.

2. Tailoring Supports

Based on what is learned, support strategies are refined so they **fit seamlessly into the workplace**. This may involve:

- Visual aids, task lists, or other adaptations.
- Job coaching during the early weeks of employment.
- Encouraging co-workers to share training and guidance.
- Adjusting supports as the employee becomes more confident and independent.

3. Social and Cultural Integration

True inclusion goes beyond task completion. Post-placement support focuses on:

- Helping the individual participate in workplace routines (breaks, meetings, social interactions).
- Encouraging colleagues to include the person in informal networks.
- Strengthening the person's identity as a valued member of the team.

4. Strengthening Employer Confidence

Post Placement Support also serves the employer by:

- Offering reassurance that help is available if issues arise.
- Providing training or advice about inclusive practices if needed.
- Ensuring productivity and business needs continue to be met.

5. Building Sustainability

The ultimate goal is for the employee to be fully integrated into the workplace, with supports embedded naturally rather than relying on outside intervention. This includes:

- Phasing out job coach presence as natural supports take over.
- Encouraging workplace relationships and social inclusion.
- Monitoring progress through regular but discreet check-ins

6. Ongoing Review and Problem-Solving

Employment specialists remain available for periodic reviews and problem-solving. If circumstances change — for the employee or the business — adjustments can be made to ensure the role remains successful.

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Funding and Billing

Customised Employment (CE) is not like traditional support, where typically you only occur cost for time spent directly with you. CE involves a high level of planning, preparation, detailed note taking and business engagement that often takes place without the participant present. These non-face-to-face activities are not “extra admin” — they are the critical work that makes the employment pathway possible. They are essential to the success of the framework.
Both face-to-face and non-face-to-face supports are chargeable to a participant’s NDIS plan, provided they are linked to the individual’s employment goals. All billable activities face-to-face and non-face-to-face will be captured and documented for accountability.

1. Discovery

- Face-to-Face: Observing the participant at home and in the community, at any sport or activity they enjoy and can do and identifying strengths and interests.
- Non-Face-to-Face: conducting interviews with invested stakeholders, Analysing observations, drafting the Discovery profile, reflecting on themes, and creating the Customised Plan for Employment (CPE).
  Justification: discovery documentation is in depth and much more involved than typical support notes there is also planning ensures the participant’s strengths and contributions are translated into a usable roadmap — this cannot be achieved in one session alone.

2. Job Development

- Face-to-Face: Meeting the participant to review their vocational themes and occasionally accompanying them to workplaces.
- Non-Face-to-Face: Researching potential employers, preparing visual résumés and concept portfolios, and writing Employer Needs–Benefits Analyses (ENBAs).
  Justification: Most job development activity happens non face to face “out in the field” with businesses, not with the participant present. This behind-the-scenes work is what opens the door to real opportunities.

3. Job Negotiation

- Face-to-Face: Attending meetings with the employer (with or without the participant), negotiating role design, and supporting workplace tours.
- Non-Face-to-Face: Drafting customised role proposals, preparing documentation for both parties, and following up with employers by email or phone.
  Justification: Negotiation is not a single meeting — it is a structured process involving preparation, drafting, and follow-up to secure a sustainable role.

4. Post-Placement Support

- Face-to-Face: On-site job coaching, training in workplace routines, and supporting natural relationships with colleagues.
- Non-Face-to-Face: Creating task lists, adapting resources, liaising with employers outside of shift times, and preparing progress reports for reviews.
  Justification: Long-term job success depends on adapting supports to the culture of the workplace. This requires preparation and coordination beyond direct contact hours.

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Why Non-Face-to-Face Support Is Essential

- CE is a highly customised process unlike standard support work, there is no “ready-made job” waiting. Every opportunity is built from the ground up.
- Much of the real work happens *before* the participant sets foot in the workplace researching, engaging, and negotiating with employers.
- Without this non-face-to-face effort, the participant would be left competing for open vacancies exactly what CE is designed to avoid.
- Families and coordinators should expect a higher proportion of behind-the-scenes hours in CE than in other NDIS supports, because this is what creates the job in the first place

Codes that can be utilised for the Customised Employment:

Capacity Building:

Finding and keeping a job

10_016_0102_5_3	Employment Assistance	Hour	$80.06

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Stage	What It Is	Key Activities	Purpose / Benefits
Discovery	A person-centred, strengths-based exploration of who the individual is.	• Observation in natural settings• Conversations with family, allies, and staff• Identification of vocational themes• Documentation of contributions and ideal work conditions	• Uncovers authentic strengths and interests• Creates the foundation for planning• Empowers the individual by focusing on contributions
Job Development	The process of identifying and engaging businesses that align with the individual's themes and contributions.	• Research potential employers• Prepare visual résumé / concept portfolio• Conduct Employer Needs–Benefits Analysis (ENBA)• Build relationships with employers	• Matches person's contributions to real business needs• Shifts focus from "filling vacancies" to "creating opportunities"• Builds trust and credibility with employers
Job Negotiation	Collaborative process of designing or carving a customised role with the employer.	• Frame conversation around employer needs• Present customised options (job carving, creation, adjusted schedules)• Address questions about support and sustainability• Formalise role and expectations	• Creates meaningful, sustainable roles• Ensures mutual benefit for person and employer• Positions the individual as a valued contributor
Post-Placement Support	Structured, ongoing support once the person starts work.	• Job analysis of workplace culture, routines, and supports• Tailor supports to fit naturally into the business• Encourage natural supports and workplace relationships• Provide periodic check-ins and problem-solving	• Smooth transition into the workplace• Increases employer confidence• Embeds sustainability and long-term success

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Case study

From the Jobseeker's Perspective – *Leah's Story*

Leah is a 24-year-old woman with cerebral palsy. She uses a powered wheelchair and a communication device, and she requires support workers for mobility and personal care. While she has significant support needs, Discovery revealed she has a set of *very real skills* and contributions.

Discovery: Through time spent with Leah at home, with family, and in the community, employment specialists uncovered:

- Digital skills: Leah uses adaptive technology confidently. She is quick with her iPad and can navigate online platforms to send emails, checklists, and digital records.
- Organisational ability: Leah enjoys following structured routines and is skilled at using digital calendars, checklists, and reminder apps.
- Attention to detail: She consistently notices errors in documents, labels, and signage, which she flags using her communication device.
- Social warmth**:** Leah loves being around others, greeting people, and being part of a team environment. Her presence often uplifts a room.

Her vocational themes were *administration*, *organisation*, and *customer service*.

Customised Plan for Employment:

Leah's contributions were outlined as:

- Digital record-keeping and data checks.
- Sending reminder emails or calendar alerts.
- Maintaining inventories or stock checklists.
- Greeting customers or clients with her device.

  Her ideal conditions: an accessible office, predictable routines, and colleagues who engage with her assistive technology.

From the Employer's Perspective – *Bright Office Supplies*

Bright Office Supplies is a small but busy company that sells stationery and equipment to local schools and businesses. Staff are often pulled in multiple directions — serving customers in-store, managing deliveries, and handling bulk orders.

Challenges Before CE:

- Order paperwork was often delayed or incomplete.
- Customer follow-up emails sometimes slipped through the cracks.

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- Stock items were occasionally misplaced, frustrating both staff and customers.
- Staff were stretched between the shopfront and the back office, leading to inefficiencies.

Job Negotiation:

Through the Employer Needs–Benefits Analysis, the employment specialist identified a set of tasks that were important but not being consistently completed. Together, they designed a customised role for Leah: *Administration Support Assistant*.

Her duties included:

- Data checks: Using adaptive software to review order forms for missing information.
- Reminder emails: Sending templated messages to customers about order pickups or deliveries.
- Inventory lists: Flagging items on the digital stock system that needed restocking.
- Front desk greeting**:** Using her device to say "Welcome to Bright Office Supplies, how can we help you today?" when customers entered.

Supports were agreed on: Leah's support worker would assist with physical movement around the workspace, while staff would handle tasks requiring manual lifting.

Post-Placement Support

Job analysis in the office revealed that staff had informal shortcuts when entering data, so Leah's checklists were adapted to align with this culture. A natural support emerged in the accounts clerk, who enjoyed helping Leah interpret order forms. Staff were trained briefly in how to interact with Leah's communication device, which made the process smoother.

Over time, Leah's presence became part of the company's routine. Customers appreciated her friendly greeting, and staff reported fewer order mistakes and better organisation.

Benefits:

Leah: She secured a role that made use of her *digital skills, attention to detail, and warmth*. She was seen not just as a participant in a program but as a valuable colleague in a commercial setting.

business: Bright Office Supplies became more efficient — fewer errors, more consistent customer follow-up, and improved service. Staff morale improved, as they felt supported rather than stretched thin. The owner also gained a stronger reputation in the community for inclusion and professionalism.

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