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CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT WORKS FOR VETERANS

Return to Integrated, Competitive Employment

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PREFACE

Customized Employment (CE) is often thought of as a new idea, when in reality it is an approach that has been used by successful professionals in their own job searches for decades. It includes talking with the people you know (networking), identifying and testing out ideas (work trial or discovery visit), deciding what is most important to you (ideal conditions of employment), examining what you can bring to an employer (talents, skills, and abilities), finding the right cultural fit (informational interviews) and negotiating the position (job carving or creation).

Veterans can face a myriad of challenges when returning to the workforce including service-related disabilities, lack of experience in the civilian world, limited social capital due to multiple deployments, and other unique challenges associated with their transition. CE can help in all of these areas with a qualified Employment Specialist or other support staff assisting the Veteran to apply the strategies. Ultimately, Discovery helps the Veteran figure out which employment situation is the “best fit.”

Depending on the Veteran, Discovery can take many forms, but always begins with getting to know the individual’s skills, talents, and interests. It includes learning when and where they are at their best and when and how they need support. It is the combination of these factors, along with exploring local businesses or business opportunities, which paint a solid picture of the contributions each Veteran can bring to the civilian workforce and our economy as a whole.

The jobs Veterans obtain through CE are varied and represent every sector and industry of our society. They even include self-employment. In the next few pages you will meet a few men and women who have proudly served, successfully negotiated the transition into civilian life, and are productively employed in customized employment through the assistance of some amazing peers and the strategies of CE.

MEET OUR VETERANS

Ernie



Staff Sergeant Ernesto "Ernie" G. always envisioned retiring from the Marine Corps. When he was medevaced home after an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion, he still expected to return to his unit in the Middle East. He quickly learned he was "undeployable."

Ernie faced many barriers as he transitioned to the civilian workforce including one employer who forbade support animals, stating they were just pets. That employers hired Ernie simply because he was a Veteran—without regard for his skills or interests. Ernie was told multiple times that he was "unfit" or would be a "liability." Other employers seemingly presumed that with no visible injuries Ernie was "messed up in the head." Ernie was determined to find the right job and once again be the provider for his wife and four children. Through his Discovery journey, he identified his true passion: helping fellow Veterans. He also realized he had some specific ideal conditions of employment. First, he needed to move his wife and kids out of downtown Los Angeles and into a smaller community where they could be safe and thrive. He also needed a flexible schedule in order to continue his treatment with the VA. He needed a place where he could take breaks when the stress got to him; he needed time and space to work alone rather than in a crowded environment. The Discovery process took these needs into account and assisted Ernie in finding a job customized to his needs.

For the past three years, Ernie has been employed as an Employment Specialist with the Bob Hope Veterans Support Program helping Veterans navigate the civilian job market. As with Ernie, many Veterans (including those with disabilities) are thinking about a civilian job and life after the military for the first time. They must learn to navigate a new life without the structure, support, and comradery the military provided. For Veterans struggling through their transition, Ernie says, "Don't let pride keep you from providing for your family. Reach out to organizations that can help with food and emergency assistance. If you find an organization like the one I work for, ask them for the help you need—they understand the challenges you're facing and are truly committed to easing your transition."

Abigail



Abigail C.'s military journey started when she was just nine years old. She wanted to be something "bigger and better" than herself and was determined to be the "best of the best"—a United States Marine. On her 17th birthday that dream became a reality as she entered the Corps where she served eight years in Supply and Communications.

Once Abigail transitioned out, she spent more than six months trying to get a job, while struggling with being a Marine Veteran in the civilian world, and her new reality of living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She decided to go to school and attained both her bachelor's and master's degrees. She tried volunteering and found a job she thought was a good fit, where she was able to help the community and serve others who served, only to learn harsh lessons about working for someone who lacked a Veteran's perspective. It was about this time she met AI who would become her peer, mentor, and Customized Employment Specialist.

AI and Abigail worked closely together to establish an easy rapport and Abigail came to see that she had a great deal to offer employers and the community. Connecting with other Veterans helped build her network and make valuable contacts for her job search. Abigail said it took a while before she realized: "I can do this. I have the qualifications and skills and can do anything someone without PTSD can do." In fact, with her skills, experience, and education, she is likely more qualified than many.

According to AI, "Abigail was encouraged to consider the importance of a prospective employer's work culture and the capacity to provide accommodations for a professional's physical and mental health needs. This led Abigail to prioritize the types of employers she was interviewing with, eventually leading her to join the team with Paralyzed Veterans of America." Abigail laughs and says it was her "interview" of her potential boss that convinced him she was the perfect candidate for the job.

With Abigail's new job, she has new confidence, and is committed to building an amazing future as a proud Marine Veteran, stating, "I feel really positive about the future for the first time ever."

Miguel



Miguel H. got out of the Marine Corps after four years, only to be recalled for a second tour of duty in Iraq. During the time between deployments, he developed a successful career in the banking industry and was on an upward trajectory. When he returned from deployment the second time, things were much different for him. He was unable to return to banking, and jobs were scarce. That, combined with his anxiety and PTSD, forced him to rethink his career. Miguel states: "I didn't know where to start."

Miguel enrolled in school for his bachelor's degree and found he learned more slowly than he used to. He tried different jobs, but they didn't feel right. He met his Customized Employment Specialist at a homeless shelter, and they started working together to identify areas of interest to pair with employer needs. They also spent time discovering the things that would help Miguel be successful at his job. He needed a place with space and not too many people, some control of his environment, and time to attend medical appointments. He also needed work that was close to home, someone to help him navigate this new world, and to learn a lot about life with PTSD.

As they explored different jobs, the Customized Employment Specialist helped him navigate the VA system, connected Miguel to various Veterans' groups, helped him get an internship, and created an employment plan. Miguel obtained his Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Outreach Trainer card, which gave him credentials many job seekers don't have and enabled him to teach OSHA safety regulations part-time. He then studied for and received his license for security work and qualified for and obtained his exposed carry firearms permit so he could be an armed guard.

The information learned during Discovery with his Customized Employment Specialist led Miguel to his current position working for a Department of Defense contractor as an armed guard where his hyper-vigilance is an asset. Miguel's position meets his ideal conditions of employment, and he is on the fast track to obtain his security clearance which will open additional doors for him. He hopes to continue to move up the ladder, learn more about the processes within his current company, and looks forward to new challenges.

When asked what he'd like to say to other Veterans transitioning back to civilian life, he says, "Find someone who can help you break things down and make a plan. Also take every opportunity to get experience and gain skills you can offer to employers."

Bill



Bill G. always knew he wanted to get out of Alaska and attend college. For him, that meant joining the military. He served four years in the Navy before leaving military service. After five years as a civilian, Bill decided to return to service and joined the Coast Guard, where he served another eight years as an Electronic Technician and Special Capabilities Diver. While it is unusual for a service member to leave after 14 years, he and his wife had made a home in San Diego. After much soul searching, Bill decided, "I can make it through anything - how tough can it be to transition out? I got this."

Transition was harder than expected, which surprised Bill. After 14 years of active service, and despite multiple surgeries, he felt there was nothing he couldn't do. But he found that "today's world is different." He spent months sending his resume to companies that never responded, paid someone to rework his resume with no result, and sought assistance from an agency that, upon review of his aptitude test, told him he could do anything. Ultimately, Bill got frustrated. He decided to go back to school, saying: "The GI Bill is the best transition tool out there because what better way to say you don't know what to do with your life than to go to University?"

While working on his master's degree, Bill started thinking about being his own boss. He then met Cynthia, who became his Customized Employment Specialist. Bill had the idea and the technical skills, and Cynthia helped him organize his dream of being an entrepreneur into reality. Cynthia helped him develop a business plan; identify and customize needed resources, networks, and specialized entrepreneurial training; and introduced him to local influencers. CE, or Guided Transition as Bill likes to call it, provided the opportunities necessary to launch Pursetto, offering a safe way for people to store their purses or briefcases while charging their cell phones. Bill's target audience is small business owners who would like to offer their customers an added convenience.

Bill is excited about his future and feels confident that this is simply his first start-up company. He expects to build Pursetto and sell it; then design a new product and business. When asked what is important for transitioning Veterans, Bill says, "peer-to-peer support, a warm hand-off, and connections to somebody who knows somebody." Bill also says the ongoing connection with his employment specialist—both before and after he launched his company—was and continues to be most helpful. In summary, Bill says, "Cheering matters. Having Cynthia (his Customized Employment Specialist) in my corner is a big help because starting a business is rough and not for the faint of heart. The encouragement and hearing someone say, 'you can do this' helps reinforce what you know is possible."

Alex



Alex O. felt his employment options after ending his career as an Army Sergeant were limited. As a former 13 Bravo artilleryman, he felt he had two options: he could work at Disneyland firing one of their cannons, or he could try to become the person with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers who fires their cannon each time they score a touchdown.

He applied for several positions within local police departments and ended up accessing his GI benefits while sending resumes to companies all over southern California. Then he heard about a "squared away guy named Russell" who helped Veterans find meaningful employment. As Alex says, "We, Veterans, aren't really impressed by flashy brochures or big ads. But, when a brother says someone is stand up, we know they are."

Alex soon started the Discovery process, where he began to define what was truly important for him. He really examined the skills gained in the Army, and learned to speak of his own performance rather than boasting solely of his team's accomplishments.

He recognized what made him get up in the morning, what he was proud of (his service, leadership, and the rank of sergeant), what he was really good at, and finally realized that he needed to continue serving. Alex points out that the word Sergeant is literally translated to "servant" and that is what he wanted to do—serve his fellow brother and sister Veterans.

With Russell's guidance, Alex created a blueprint to chart his course. He changed his area of study; learned as much as he could about mental health issues and how employers, community members, and Veterans themselves view "disabilities;" began volunteering; and became a certified peer mentor. Alex tried out several jobs before he was able to carve a position where he gets to use his skills, experiences, and voice to change the face of disability as a Community Outreach and Engagement Director at an established non-profit.

According to Alex, the Customized Employment approach is critical and is entirely different than the "plug and play assistance generally offered where you're told you were X in the military so you should be Y in the civilian workforce." He encourages other Veterans transitioning from the military to sit down with someone and talk about what's really important and start building your social network. He also says, "Talk about your military career and the things you do so you can get a civilian perspective on the military point of view. This can help you explain what you learned in terms that employers can understand and apply to their own business needs."

KEY RESOURCES

| Resource | Link | Description |
|--|---|--|
| Essential Elements of Customized Employment | https://wintac-s3.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/topic-areas/ta03_IntCompetEmpl/Esse ntial-Elements-of-Customized-Employment-for-Universal-Application%20Rev%207-17.pdf | The Essential Elements of Customized Employment identifies the essential elements of Customized Employment and is a guide for the universal application of these elements across service delivery and training providers. |
| Perspective of Employers on Customized Employment | http://www.leadcenter.org/system/files/resource/downloadable/version/CE_Info_Brief_Employer_Perspective_0.pdf Employer Perspective 0.pdf | Authored by six customized employment subject matter experts, Perspective of Employers on Customized Employment, a short (7 page) informational brief provides the results of six focus groups conducted to garner the perspective of employers of various sizes, sectors, and locations who hired individuals with disabilities into customized jobs. |
| Customized Employment Works Everywhere | https://www.dol.gov/odep/documents/vignette_v3_blue_508_final.pdf | These six one-page vignettes illustrate the various forms Customized Employment can take from job carving to self-employment for people with disabilities. |
| Guided Group Discovery (GGD) Materials | http://www.leadcenter.org/resources/tool-manual/guided-group-discovery-resources-introduction-and-course-participant-workbook-and-facilitator-guide | The purpose of Guided Group Discovery is to lay the foundation for competitive integrated employment as a Universal Design that can benefit all job seekers. This Guide teaches facilitators how to conduct Guided Group Discovery |
| GGD Guide – Veterans Edition | http://www.leadcenter.org/resources/tool-manual/guided-group-discovery-veterans-edition-facilitator-guide | This Guide is similar to the Guided Group Discovery Guide above, but focuses specifically on Veterans who are interested in participating in Guided Group Discovery. |
| Self-Guided Discovery Workbook | http://www.leadcenter.org/resources/tool-manual/self-guided-discovery-facilitators-guide-helping-people-discover-their-own-path-employment | This workbook is meant for individuals with barriers to employment who want to partake in Discovery independently and at their own pace. |
| Self-Guided Discovery Webinar | http://www.leadcenter.org/webinars/webinar-self-guided-discovery-helping-people-discover-their-own-path-employment | The webinar highlights the ways Self-Guided Discovery can be used to assist individuals to achieve employment outcomes. |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Debbie Ball has spent over 20 years advocating for societal change and creating pathways to make it happen. In addition to building vision and aptitude within Easterseals Southern California's Employment Division, she works with stakeholders throughout the country to build capacity and create urgency around Customized Employment and Employment First.

Her concurrent roles as an Easterseals Vice President, board member on both California Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) and Foundation for Developmental Disabilities boards of directors, advisory committee member of the University of California, Los Angeles Tarjan University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disability (UCEDD), and membership in numerous coalitions connect Debbie with some of the country's best minds. These roles allow her to continue working with, and on behalf of, others committed to ending isolation and building brighter futures for people with barriers to employment including veterans and individuals with dual diagnosis. She has a bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Management from the University of Redlands.

