

Quick Guide: Preparing Students for Competitive Integrated Employment

My name is Ben Carter. In high school, I had a strong desire to provide a service, interact with people, and stay mobile throughout the day. I worked with my parents, teachers, and service providers to identify my interest and skills and prepare me for competitive employment. I worked with a supported employment agency, Alternative Work Concepts, to find just the right job. After engaging in a transition assessment process that included several ecological and situational assessments, I found a job that was a good fit for me. Lane County Health and Human Services had a specific need for courier service to deliver confidential documents from one location to another throughout the area. It was a position that would allow me to provide a service, interact with people, and stay mobile! I like to work. The favorite part of my job is talking to people when I deliver the mail. I like getting a paycheck (personal communication, Ben Carter, Lane County Health and Human Service Employee & Scott Whetham, Program Coordinator Alternative Work Concepts, November 3, 2015).

To learn more about Ben visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFD8oJHkKJQ&feature=youtu.be>

What is Competitive Integrated Employment?

Competitive Integrated Employment, real work for real pay in a job that aligns the post-school employment goals of the student, is the gold standard of transition outcomes for students with disabilities. This is a desired transition outcome for all youth who choose to work, regardless of disability or needed accommodations or support. Competitive integrated employment is a realistic and desirable expectation for all youth.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by Title IV of the Workforce Investment Opportunities Act (WIOA) of 2014, defines Competitive Integrated Employment as, *work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is: (a) compensated at or above minimum wage or commensurate with individuals without disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experience, (b) eligible for the level of benefits provided to other employees, (c) at a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities, and (d) presented opportunities for advancement similar to other employees without disabilities in similar positions.*

As families, schools, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies and other partners plan and engage in transition planning with students, it is important to understand that employment looks different for each student. Competitive integrated employment options should be individualized and align with a student's interests, preferences, skills, and support needs; and with the labor market needs of businesses. By making the connection between student's interests skills, and preferences and business needs, good job matches can be brokered so employment is a mutually beneficial outcome for both the student and business.

One type of competitive integrated employment outlined in the Rehabilitation Act that may align with student interests and support needs is:

- *Supported Employment*, as paraphrased from WIOA (2014), supported employment is defined as individualized (i.e., consistent with individual's strengths, abilities, interests) competitive

employment in an integrated work setting for individuals who need intensive support services to perform the work involved.

In assisting students to achieve competitive integrated employment, one strategy that can be used is developing a customized employment opportunity for the student.

- *Customized Employment* is defined as individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It may include employment developed through job carving, self-employment, entrepreneurial initiatives, or other job development or restructuring strategies that result in job responsibilities being customized and individually negotiated to fit the needs of individuals with a disability. Customized employment assumes the provision of reasonable accommodations and supports necessary for the individual to perform the functions of a job that is individually negotiated and developed (WIOA, 2014). *For more information on customized employment:*
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/CustomizedEmployment.htm>

Why is Competitive Integrated Employment Important?

Research has demonstrated that employment is a factor associated with an individual's overall quality of life or assessment of their well-being (Canha, Simoes, Ownes, & Matos, 2013). However, when we look at employment outcomes of students with disabilities transitioning from school to work they have persistently lagged behind their peers without disabilities (Fogg, Harrington, & McMahaon, 2010). A 2013 report from the U.S. Department of Labor indicated that only 26% of students with disabilities are employed after high school compared to almost 64% of their peers without disabilities. Additionally, persons with disabilities experience the highest rates of poverty of any subcategory of Americans recorded by the Census Bureau. Of the nearly 30 million individuals with disabilities ages 18–64, 27%, or more than 4 million people, live in poverty. This is more than double the rate of 12.5% for the entire population (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2013).

Education and VR both have key roles and responsibilities in helping students achieve competitive integrated employment. There has been an increased emphasis on educational services that are mindful of optimal post-school outcomes (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Schools are required to begin transition planning for students with disabilities no later than age 16 (age 14 in some states) to prepare for students for post-school education/training and employment. State education agencies are required to collect and measure post-school employment outcomes for students with disabilities (i.e., competitive employment within one year of high school graduation).

The recent reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act (WIOA, 2014), legislates VR's requirement to begin transition planning with students no later than age 16. VR, in partnership with Education, is also required to provide pre-employment transition services designed to prepare students with disabilities for competitive employment. These mandates along with new requirements restricting use of subminimum wage heightened the emphasis on students achieving a post-school outcome of competitive integrated employment.

How Does Research Support Competitively Integrated Employment?

Attempts over the last decade to synthesize what works in transition have yielded and increased the knowledge base about effective transition practice (Cobb & Alwell, 2007; Test et al., 2009). Among the important findings is that solid academic preparation in conjunction with transition planning, youth empowerment, family involvement, activities that connect transition resources, and work experiences are critically important in influencing school-to-work transition outcomes. As it relates to employment preparation and support, research has consistently shown that paid work during the secondary years is the strongest predictor of post-school employment success for students with disabilities, regardless of disability label or intensity of special education services (e.g., Bullis et al. 1995, Wagner et al., 2014).

Empowering students to determine, plan for, and receive appropriate workforce supports is key to a student being successful in competitive integrated employment. Research has found that youth and their families who collaborate with educators, local agency personnel, and businesses are more likely to be employed as adults. Perhaps more interestingly, the nature of the support provided to the student on and off the job determined the difference between a successful job placement and an unsuccessful one (Brewer, 2005). Collaboration among partners working with the student is important can lead to the desired outcome of competitive integrated employment after high school. When collaboration is directly focused on outcomes for youth and the systems that serve them – rather than merely referring them for a “hand off” to the next responsible party – higher school completion and employment rates are likely (Fabian & Luecking, 2015).

Where Do You Find the Primary Resources for Employment Preparation and Supports needed to Prepare Youth for Competitive Integrated Employment?

How Does This Apply to Youth and Young Adults?

- Learn about work and why it is important: <http://www.youthhood.org/jobcenter/index.asp>
- Explore career opportunities through active participation information gathering: <http://www.onestopcoach.org/> ; <https://www.onetonline.org/>
- Learn about training opportunities that align with careers: <http://www.onestopcoach.org/FindTraining/types/types-of-training.aspx>
- Learn about potential members on your transition team: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/adultservices/>
- Explore possible job accommodations: <https://askjan.org/indiv/>

How Does This Apply to Families of Young Adults with Disabilities?

- Set the expectation of work/assist youth in preparing for employment: <http://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/planning/preparing-employment.asp>
- Support youth in the development of post-school employment goals: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/employment/>
- Assist youth in making connections to appropriate services and supports: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/adultservices/>
- Explore work incentive programs: <https://www.socialsecurity.gov/disabilityresearch/wi/generalinfo.htm#ssdiwi>

How Does This Apply to Administrators?

- Provide school-wide comprehensive and systematic opportunities for students to learn about various careers: <https://www.acteonline.org/general.aspx?id=652#.Vnlj9pMrLVo>
- Support teachers in integrating career readiness skills into the general curriculum: <http://www.careertech.org/sites/default/files/CareerReadyPractices-FINAL.pdf>
- Support schools in providing course offerings throughout the school day so scheduling conflicts do not restrict student access to occupational courses: <http://www.pbs.org/makingschoolswork/sbs/hstw/>
- Develop school/business partnerships to support career exploration and quality jobs for students: <http://www.transitionta.org/sites/default/files/postsecondary/SCB%20Partnerships%20Guide.FINAL%201.pdf>

How Does This Apply to School-Level Practitioners?

- Support students in leading and directing the transition planning process: <http://www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/trasition-education-materials/student-directed-transition-planning.html>
- Assist students to explore career opportunities through active participation information gathering: <https://www.onetonline.org/>
- Assist students to develop work skills and behaviors through work-based learning and other community experiences: http://www.selnmembers.org/components/com_wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/seln-volunteering-internships-and-unpaid-work-experiences.pdf
- Conduct assessments to determine student's work-related abilities, the type and amount of supports required by student, and possible strategies to reduce amount of support needed: <http://www.communityinclusion.org/its/kz/DiscrepChart.Steps.doc>
- Refer and assist students in obtaining desired adult services: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/adultservices/>

How Does This Apply to Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors?

Collect assessment data in multiple settings and from multiple people in the student's circle of support to learn about strengths, abilities, interests: <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/information-brief-20>

- Involve student in the job development process by encouraging them to provide information that reflects their interests, talents, positive traits to create a good job match between student and employer: <https://www.dol.gov/odep/ietoolkit/publications/500.pdf> ;
- Develop long-term partnerships with businesses for career exploration and quality jobs for students: <http://www.transitionta.org/sites/default/files/postsecondary/SCB%20Partnerships%20Guide.FINAL%201.pdf>
- Develop jobs through job carving, self-employment, or entrepreneurial initiatives, or other job development or restructuring strategies: <http://www.griffinhammis.com/images/carving.pdf>; <https://www.dol.gov/odep/ietoolkit/publications/500.pdf>
- Work collaboratively with student and employer to develop assistive technology of individualized supports that are as typical to the workplace as possible and maximize individual performance: <http://www.workwithoutlimits.org/employers/ra/at>

Additional Employment Resources Relevant to Secondary Education

- Association of Persons Supporting Employment First: <http://apse.org/>
- Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP): <http://www.dol.gov/odep/>
- Integrated Employment Toolkit:
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/ietoolkit/communityEmploymentAgencies.htm>
- National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD Center): <http://www.leadcenter.org/>
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth): <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/>
- Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT): <http://www.peatworks.org/>
- Employer Assistance and Resource Network: <http://askearn.org/>
- SAMSHA Supported Employment Evidence-Based Practice Toolkit:
<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA08-4365/HowtoUseEBPKITS-SE.pdf>

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This document was developed by The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), Charlotte, NC, funded by Cooperative Agreement Number H326E140004 with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services - jointly from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). This document has been reviewed and approved by the Office of Special Education and the Rehabilitation Services. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education. OSEP Project Officer: Dr. Selete Avoke. RSA Project Officer: Kristen Rhinehart-Fernandez. This product is public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, the citation should be: National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (2016). *Competitive Integrated Employment*. Developed for NTACT by Dawn A. Rowe, Ruth Allison, Jacque Hyatt, & Laura Owens-Johnson.