Customised Employment

May 2024

Defining Customised Employment within the Australian Disability Employment context and enhancing the model of Service Practice through the development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes using Customised Employment.

Peter Symonds // May 2024

Recognition of supporting partners and contributors

The consultant would like to express appreciation to the people who gave up their time to contribute to the creation of the report. Their commitment to assisting people with disability was evident throughout the conversations during the project's lifespan, regardless of the roles people had, and it was a highlight of the work.

Acknowledgement of country

The report acknowledges the traditional owners of the land upon which it was created, the Murimimina people of the Oyster Bay tribe, and the traditional owners of the lands from which the contributors to the report come. Respect is paid to the leaders, past, present and emerging, of the traditional owners of those lands.

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Executive summary

Customised Employment is a strategy aimed primarily at assisting individuals with high and complex support needs to obtain community-based employment. It gained increased recognition in Australia following recommendations by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with a Disability. The Commission urged the Department of Social Services to incorporate Customised Employment models into the new Disability Employment Services framework.

To aid the understanding of the strategy across the Australian disability employment ecosystem, NDS engaged Peter Symonds Consulting to review the issues surrounding Customised Employment (CE) against a specific scope of work described in the objectives and deliverables. The report presents a range of recommendations as a result.

A reference group of six individuals who brought differing but knowledgeable perspectives on CE was formed, supported by two subject matter experts on CE to assist in the development of the report.

The project leader engaged stakeholders from a wide range of perspectives to elicit information that would inform the project's objectives and deliverables.

Scope of work

The report's objectives were to:

- Clearly define Customised Employment (CE) within the Australian disability employment context to provide a baseline in the sector marketplace with a mutual understanding of CE by providers, service model participants and consumers and legislative and governance entities.

- Development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes using models of Customised Employment.

It then responded to key deliverables coming from the objectives.

- Define modes of Customised Employment

- Review time limit and indicative model cost.

- Development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes aligned to the CE model.

- Assist NDS with the webpage of CE models and associated resources.

The last deliverable sits outside this report.

Summary of major findings

Despite the recognition of Customised Employment as an effective strategy by the Commission (and others), a lack of understanding of the underlying principles across stakeholders of Customised Employment has led to fragmented definitions and practices of Customised Employment and limited research into its underlying methodologies and application.

A common outcome of the engagement with stakeholders and a review of the literature was the definition needed to move beyond simple descriptors of the strategy and also to define the

elements and phases of the tool to create pathways to implementation.

The report found that more peer-reviewed data was needed to describe an appropriate time frame or costs for activities to be undertaken. Often, overseas funding arrangements were identified as inadequate without recognition of the factors that led to those limits being set.

The report notes the difficulty in prescribing timelines and costs when the strategy has a person-centred focus and individuals with a wide range of skills, aspirations, resources and impairments use the CE strategy.

Stakeholders noted the challenges of securing an adequate allocation of hours in funding packages, created by the low expectations of supporting systems of the cohort wanting to gain community-based employment.

Despite these constraints, the report identified some peer-reviewed benchmarks of time and funding related to community employment supports that had assumed some programmatic legitimacy. These employment support arrangements were suited to implementing the CE strategy.

Evidence-informed service is the bedrock of good service provision. However, the report found that the data collected regarding CE could have been more extensive, often based on pilot programs and anecdotes. There was little collation of data pertaining to CE activity into an easily accessible, centralised database that could inform the sector-wide development of the CE strategy. Where data was collected, it more often aligned to the implementation of the strategy within the pilot. Again, differing definitions of CE made the development of an agreed data framework problematic.

The engagement of stakeholders noted differing perspectives regarding where the emphasis should be regarding data collection. While the range of commentary found on this matter was limited, the issues related to qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

The other challenge in creating sustainable data sets was recognising the state of flux within the various employment systems that may impact the direction of services and, therefore, the data to underpin practice strategies emerging from the multiple reviews.

The research identified the need for more data in the USA, leaving few resources around which to build an Australian data framework.

Recommendations

The findings enabled recommendations to be developed, recognising the limitations created by the matters noted above, the state of flux across the Australian disability employment ecosystem and the project's time frame to create specific and detailed recommendations.

Overall, these recommendations aim to enhance the understanding, implementation and evaluation of Customised Employment practices, leading to improved outcomes for individuals with high and complex support needs seeking community-based employment in Australia.

Hyperlinks connect the reader to more detailed information on matters raised in the Executive Summary.

Deliverable one: Define modes of Customised Employment

- Customised Employment is recognised as a practice strategy within the framework known as Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). This, in turn, sits within the Australian definition of "Supported Employment," which covers a number of employment arrangements. Appendix 2

- The descriptor of Customised Employment is adopted as the Australian benchmark, recognising the universality of the definition. Definition

- The three principles underpinning CE are recognised as critical elements of its successful implementation. Principles

- To deliver effective Customised Employment, the Elements of CE and Effective CE Practice are adopted, ensuring the CE model moves past a simple definition to one that has a defined framework of practice. Elements of CE and Effective CE

- That CE is made up of four phases and each has its descriptor of good practice. Appendix 2

Deliverable two: Defining timeframes and pricing for Customised Employment

- Until evaluations of relevant trials are completed, it is recommended that NDIS planners allocate $22,000 per year for the employment-related elements of the annual plan for each new NDIS job seeker.

- The report stresses that employment funding is not to be automatically removed as a plan expires, because participant circumstances and availability of adequate matching supports may influence the client's capacity to invest in employment-related activities.

- The report also stresses the importance of ongoing stakeholder engagement, participant choice and control over funding use and the limited data available for establishing more explicit time frames and outcomes.

- Therefore, it is recommended that a "checkpoint for completion" of the discovery process be considered with the provider after either 10 hours of service or monthly, whichever comes first.

- These "checkpoint" discussions should centre on outcomes aligned with the elements of Effective CE Practice and as described in the Participant–Service Provider Service Agreement.

- NDS establishes a methodology that enables the collection of data on the time each phase takes to complete. NDS and its members are supported by CEs being offered to complete the data collection noting the impact of the variables emanating from who is supported.

- NDS supports the proposed Centre of Disability Employment Excellence's understanding of time and funding issues by providing its data upon the centre becoming operational.

- This field data is used to inform all organisations and policymakers on the spread of the average times activities may take.

Deliverable three: Development of a data collection framework

- Data sets have been developed that link back to the Principles of CE, Elements of CE and Effective CE Practice, as well as quantitative outcomes, and these are applied to each Phase as have been described in this report.

- The data sets developed for each phase recognise CEs person-centred approach, and ensure the expectations align with the elements of good CE practice.

- The goal of the data sets is to evaluate and support services that secure CIE outcomes through the gaining, maintaining and enhancing of employment, which builds a life for the individual that is physically, socially and economically inclusive.

- The development of data sets that support Elements of Good CE Practices identifies existing qualitative and quantitative evidence or practices aligned to CE and CIE and that NDS encourages its membership to participate in any pilots aligned to accepted research practices.

- That this work is undertaken through a partnership consisting of subject matter experts drawn from participant representative bodies, provider peak bodies, centres of academic tesearch and funding bodies.

- These recommendations are consistent with the aims and objectives of the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence (DSS, 2023), which seeks to develop and consolidate data that will lead to enhanced outcomes. However, the report notes the probable lag time for this centre to become operational and recommends that NDS supports the activation of this strategy as soon as possible.

Other issues raised by stakeholders

There was universality in feedback from stakeholders that workforce development stood at the centre of successful Customised Employment.

There was strong interest in not just one-off training but also ongoing mentoring through strategies such as CE Communities of Practice, where examples of good CE practice and structures could be shared, both at a direct practitioner level and with senior officers engaging in organisations and programmatic structures and methodologies that would enhance strategies.

This was backed up by a review of literature from across the US and Australia.

The report notes the significant engagement in this area already with a number of stakeholders, who are either providing or engaging with training entities that reflect their perspectives.

In recognising this diversity, it is imperative that training is aligned with the definition of CE and its strategies, as described in this report, to ensure fidelity to Customised Employment.

The report notes that NDS, through its demonstrated capacity and broad sector support relationship, would be in a solid position to assist and support further work to progress a consistent application of the CE strategy.

The Scope of the report

In January 2024, National Disability Services (NDS) contracted Peter Symonds Consulting to submit a report with the following objectives and deliverables.

Key objectives

Clearly define Customised Employment (CE) within the Australian disability employment context to provide a baseline in the sector marketplace with a mutual understanding of CE by providers, service model participants and consumers and legislative and governance entities.

Development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes using models of Customised Employment.

Deliverables

- Define modes of Customised Employment
- Review time limit and indicative model cost.
- Development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes aligned to the CE model.
- Assist NDS with the webpage of CE models and associated resources.

Key Terms and Definitions

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CE-	Customised Employment
CIE	Competitive Integrated Employment
DEA	Disability Employment Australia
DES	Disability Employment Services
DRC	Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability (aka the Disability Royal Commission)
DSA	Disability Services Act (1986)
DSP	Disability Support Pension
DSS	Department of Social Services
ESS	Employment Support Service
FWC	Fair Work Commission
ID	Intellectual Disability
JCA	Job Capacity Assessment
job candidate	A job seeker who is being put forward for employment
job seeker	An individual seeking employment
NDS	National Disability Services
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
OP	Open Employment
SE	Supported Employment

Methodology

Limitations and scope

The document is a report against the objectives and deliverables, which draws on a range of stakeholder perspectives and information sources. It should not be read as an academic research paper.

The breadth and complexity of CE in a Community-Integrated Employment (CIE) program are significant, and this report has a defined scope of deliverables. However, common issues raised by stakeholders and the review of literature that are beyond the deliverables are noted at the end of the report. Their inclusion is an indicator of further exploratory work being warranted.

Support personnel

Reference Group

Six individuals were drawn together to assist in the development of the report. These personnel had experience in Customised Employment or the Australian Employment Services ecosystem. The members are.
- Jo Huxley (ACT NDS Manager)
- Sara Murphy (Senior Training Associate, TransCen, San Francisco, USA)
- Dr Jenny Crosbie (Research Fellow, Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University, Melbourne)
- Michelle Wakeford (Senior Advisor Youth Transition Disability, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne)
- Cecile Sullivan Elder (Executive Officer, Family Advocacy, Sydney)
- Kerrie Langford (Consultant, Bateau Bay, NSW)

Two members of the NDS Employment team were also included as members of the Reference Group.
- Colin Entwistle (Head of Employment, NDS)
- Paul Musso (Policy Advisor, NDS)

Documented Terms of Reference were drawn up to guide the work of the Reference Group.

Project support personnel

- Dr June Alexander (Lecturer, Flinders University) was an active consultant throughout the project.
- Dr. Peter Smith (Director, CDERP) provided review services at the draft and final report stages.

Review of literature

A literature search was undertaken to inform the report. This consisted of peer-reviewed and "grey" literature and reports, websites, organisational information and training material. The less formal approach to literature identification should be noted, given that the report does not

in any way aspire to being an academic paper.

Material was secured from both Australian and US sources, noting the challenge of locating adequate levels of peer-reviewed research material in an Australian context.

The breakdown of literature types is as follows:
- Peer-reviewed and grey papers: 17
- Submissions to government enquiries: 2
- Websites, including generic video clips: 4
- PowerPoint presentations: 2
- Organisational newsletters and information booklets: 2
- Government reports and documents: 16.

Stakeholder groups

Thirty representatives of organisations who had some engagement with Customised Employment were contacted.

The individuals contacted represented.
- Participant and Family Advocacy and capacity-building organisations
- National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA)
- Department of Social Services (DSS)
- providers of direct service
- support coordinators
- peak disability-specific representative organisations
- peak industry bodies.

Based on feedback from the Reference Group, a set of questions aligned to their perspectives and scope of activity was prepared, and they confirmed the final sets of questions.

The identified individuals were sent text and email invitations to a teleconference or phone interview lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Eighteen individuals were interviewed, with providers being the predominant group, with ten respondents from this cohort.

At most, three attempts were made to engage with representatives of the identified organisations.

The confidentiality of all stakeholders was confirmed in written correspondence and verbally, with each ascribed an alphabetical identifier known only to the consultant.

Clarifying Definitions of Supported and Open Employment

Since the establishment of community-based employment services in 1986, the terms "Open Employment" and "Supported Employment" have been widely used to categorise available employment programs.

Historically, Supported Employment referred to work within an Australian Disability Enterprise (ADE), while Open Employment referred to jobs within mainstream businesses in the community. Disability Employment Services (DES) providers provided support for open employment.

Several stakeholders reinforced programmatic perspectives, noting DES was primarily associated with community-based employment, while Supported Employment was seen as operations located within ADEs. This observation highlights a challenge to the Customised Employment (CE) being implemented as a service strategy across both the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Disability Employment Services (DES) systems in a manner aligned with government policy and definitions (Conversations with Stakeholders, March 2024).

Although reflective of past practices, these traditional descriptors conflict with the revised definitions and principles of Supported Employment introduced in July 2022 by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). These have shifted the focus of NDIA's and DSS's definitions to the level of support needed to secure and sustain employment rather than the specific location or programmatic descriptors of employment arrangements (DSS 2023).

Therefore, this project will adopt the NDIS definition of "Supported Employment" from January 2023, recognising the broad suite of employment arrangements (Supports in employment | NDIS).

Customised employment, at its core, is a person-centred strategy. Its implementation is driven by elements and practices that seek employment beyond physical settings designed primarily to accommodate people with disability.

Therefore, the report notes that the strategy of Customised Employment (as defined) cannot be used in settings where individuals are grouped based on their disability.

The relationship with CE and other models that fall under the overarching term of Supported Employment is described in Appendix A

Deliverable One: Defining Customised Employment

Origins of Customised Employment

The concept of customising employment for individuals with significant disability emerged from pilot strategies in the USA during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Key figures such as Brown, Gold, Wehman and others pioneered this approach (Kregel et al 2020).

By 1998, there was some formalisation of the elements that would later constitute the Customised Employment service arrangements, able to operate within a range of employment programs. Marc Gold and Associates (MG&A) adopted the term "Discovery" to describe the process of Person-centred Vocational Planning. Griffin Hammis Associates adopted the term "Discovering Personal Genius" to define their version of the process, a pivotal component of the customised employment model. In practice, their versions are similar (Griffin and Smith 2017).

The first officially recognised definition of Customised Employment emerged in 2001 when the Office of Disability Employment (ODEP), located within the US Department of Labor, focused on strategies to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disability. (Riesen et al 2019).

Since then, CE and its practice have evolved. The USA has been at the forefront of engagement with Customised Employment, with developments in the ways the strategy is implemented. Organisations such as the Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre at Virginia Commonwealth University, Griffin Hammis Associates Inc., Marc Gold, and Associates (MGA), and TransCen in Washington, DC, have played crucial roles. Additionally, an emerging legislative framework, exemplified by Employment First legislation, has provided policy support structures (Niemiec et al 2009).

Customised Employment was formally "codified" by the Department of Labor in 2002 as an employment strategy within the various Supported Employment programs. It was built upon the pioneering work of figures like Marc Gold, Lou Brown, and Paul Wehman (Riesen et al 2023).

Despite the strategy's evolution over time and the supportive legislative framework within the USA, Customised Employment needs to be uniformly applied across the 52 states. More universally applied practices and a solid database to inform practice are needed (Conversations with Murphy, S. March–April 24).

While Customised Employment is often associated with individuals with significant disability, its applicability extends beyond this group. It can be effectively applied to any population facing barriers to employment. Successful applications of Customised Employment strategies with returning US veterans have been documented in The Pathway from Discovery to Job Development: Essential Steps for Customised Employment Success (YouTube) (WINTAC, 2019).

Customised Employment in the Australian context

Customised Employment (CE) has long held promise as a valuable tool for enhancing Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) outcomes across Australia. However, its widespread

application has been limited until recent years. CE was primarily used by a small group of Australian providers who collaborated with practitioners and experts in the United States. While these efforts brought insights back to Australia, their focus remained internal, catering to individuals with more significant needs, particularly those with intellectual disability.

RRTC/ VCU, Griffin Hammis and Associates (GHA), TransCen and Marc Gold and Associates (MGA) played important roles in fostering CEs development within Australia, ensuring fidelity to the CE strategy. Concurrently, models of service that included elements of Customised Employment strategies gained traction within organisations funded through Disability Employment Services (DES) prior to the nationwide implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2016.

Preceding the NDIS rollout, organisations such as Inclusion Australia (formerly NCID) demonstrated a keen interest in CE, exploring its potential to bolster CIE opportunities for individuals with intellectual disability. This report's author joined with the late Paul Cain to visit US centres of excellence to foster this work. Meanwhile, Jobsupport, based in Sydney, and other entities engaged in partnerships with institutions, like Virginia Commonwealth University, laid the foundations for CE practices. During the 1990s and 2000s, some organisations, such as Nova Employment in Sydney and The Bridge in Melbourne, incorporated CE strategies into their models of practice.

Despite improved funding and operational landscapes post-NDIS, CE implementation in Australia as a strategy to support CIE has been sporadic, hindered by varying interpretations among service providers, peak bodies, and advocacy organisations. Misconceptions persist, particularly regarding NDIS funding, which does not explicitly endorse CE, although its funding streams encompass essential CE strategies, underscoring the scheme's person-centred ethos.

Nevertheless, governmental bodies and inquiries have acknowledged CEs significance, with the Disability Royal Commission identifying it as a pivotal strategy for fostering CIE. (DRC 2022).

Recommendation 7.16 Priorities for inclusion in the new disability

The Australian Government Department of Social Services should ensure that the design of the new Disability Employment Services model:

- It is developed using inclusive design principles and co-designed by people with disability who are employed as paid members of the design team.
- Adopts Customised Employment models as a core component of service provision.
- Ensures funding arrangements facilitate flexible employment supports, such as Customised Employment, and support the progress of Disability Employment Services participants in achieving employment goals and long-term employment outcomes.

(DRC 2022)

Through the contributions of entities like the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University, Melbourne University, CDERP, the National Alliance of Capacity Building Organisations and others, with ongoing collaboration with international partners, the trajectory of CE in Australia is poised for advancement, offering potential pathways to more inclusive and diverse workplaces.

Despite the Disability Royal Commission requesting the government support CE as a core

component of service provision, the Commission's definition was not articulated in its reports beyond some important but generic statements on innovation and the adoption of service models with a solid empirical basis that were person-centred (DRC 2022).

The term "Customised Employment" (CE) in the Australian context requires clarification, as it has been misinterpreted and conflated with other related concepts, including a view that CE is a program (or sub-program) and can be assessed as such when it is an example of a person-centred, structured strategy that is used within a program or model of service.

Stakeholders have described legitimate activities, such as adjusting workstations, modifying workflows, or starting work later, as synonymous with the broader descriptors of Customised Employment. Some providers even equate Customised Employment solely with job carving, overlooking its comprehensive principles and multi-dimensional approach. Job carving, while a part of customised employment, is one of many accommodation strategies and, in this case, it is part of the final stages of customised employment. (Conversations with Murphy, S. and Smith, P., March–April 2024).

Australian organisations have not adopted a uniform definition, with some organisations implementing Customised Employment with differing degrees of fidelity to the original definition. This lack of consistency is common in Australia, as evidenced by similar challenges in the United States (Conversations with Murphy, S., March–April 2024).

To address this ambiguity, this project will define Customised Employment to encompass its underlying principles, elements, practice strategies and phases. The report notes that this expansive approach to the definition of CE was adopted and later codified in the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA–USA) as a practice strategy within a broader Supported Employment framework (WINTAC 2018).

The definition stresses CE strategies as being tailored to the strengths, needs, and interests of individuals with significant disability while meeting the business needs of the employer through flexible strategies.

In response to the need in the US to establish a universal understanding of Customised Employment, the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Centres (WINTAC), a division of the US federal Department of Education, commissioned major technical assistance and training centres to develop a national guide outlining CEs elements for application across service delivery and training providers. This initiative, undertaken between 2014 and 2017, resulted in a clearer understanding of Customised Employment, emphasising universal person-centred principles, elements and distinct phases aimed at supporting both job seekers and employers (WINTAC 2018).

Experienced practitioners have highlighted the difficulty of balancing the need for a flexible definition that accommodates diverse individual and community needs with the necessity for specificity to guide funders, users and providers of Customised Employment strategies within the CIE model. Establishing clarity in the definition is crucial for ensuring implementation fidelity and maximising successful outcomes for CIE, the latter emphasised in conversations with the NDIA (February and April 2024).

Griffin Hammis Associates developed a Discovery Fidelity descriptor for the USA to bring consistency to the CE element. This was reviewed by Riesen et al. (2019) using an online modified Delphi study to obtain consensus from a panel of experts. Conducted over three rounds, they found consensus on 55 of 60 Discovery tenets and agreement that a fidelity scale

is essential to ensure that the Discovery element of CE practice is implemented consistently.

Griffin Hammis Associates has also worked with the Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP) to develop an Australian fidelity scale. Under ethics approval from the University of Melbourne, a panel of experts in Australia and the USA convened to review the Discovery Fidelity Scale for application in Australia (Smith et al 2018). (Smith et al 2018).

A description aligned with the Australian context

In defining Customised Employment (CE) for the Australian context, the report recognises established, peer-reviewed definitions accepted by credentialled entities in other jurisdictions. The report notes that the definition should be applicable to the diverse range of potential users of CE services, irrespective of their disability type or impact, because CE, at its heart, is an individualised service strategy. Furthermore, the definition and its stages should be adaptable to various geographic environments across Australia, including metropolitan, regional and remote areas. It should facilitate engagement with families or stakeholder groups (whether they provide natural or paid support) and the community in which the participant lives, and allow for the scalability of practice.

In defining CE, the report drew on research that describes a multistage definition; it can be described as defining the "what" and the "how". This is described in Appendix 3. The report seeks to provide practitioners of CE with a definitional framework explicit enough to allow individualised processes to be developed that are suited to the person-centred approach to be undertaken.

Stage one of the definition

Customised Employment: A person-centred strategy to community-based integrated employment

Customised Employment is a person-centred strategy for securing and sustaining integrated community-based employment opportunities, including self-employment. While it is applicable to all people with experience barriers to work, it is particularly suited to individuals with significant or complex disability. It operates on the premise of identifying and leveraging each individual's strengths, abilities and interests.

This approach is meticulously crafted to align job seekers' strengths, abilities and interests with potential employers' specific business needs. Through tailored strategies, both the employer and the employee receive personalised support, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship.

Principles underlying Customised Employment

Customised Employment (CE) is not just a set of employment-related strategies; it is deeply rooted in a set of core values. These values are:

1. **Inclusivity**

   CE holds that everyone, with appropriate support, can engage in Community Based Integrated Employment.

2. **Disability advocacy**

   Traditional competitive employment methods often disadvantage individuals with disability, especially those with complex needs.

3. **Individual-centred approach**

   CE places paramount importance on recognising and addressing each person's unique employment aspirations and goals, ensuring that no one is excluded or overlooked.

   (WINTAC 2018; Smith et al 2018; Customised Employment | U.S. Department of Labor)

Acknowledging the value base underpinning CE

Recognising the inherent values within the CE Principles is crucial for fostering inclusive lives through meaningful and inclusive employment. Failure to acknowledge these principles undermines the implementation of the CE model, which facilitates universal access to the labour market. The principles directly address CEs biggest challenge in implementation, the barrier of low expectation (The CIE 2023, Author's notes).

Stage two of the definition

Elements of Customised Employment and effective Customised Employment strategies

Moving beyond descriptors

A definition and principles need more guidance for practitioners, participants, families, funders and policymakers regarding the effective implementation of CE strategies for optimal CIE outcomes. Therefore, this report aims to expand upon the descriptor above by examining the various elements and phases of CE. Organisations committed to implementing Customised Employment strategies must understand not only the theoretical descriptions but also how data-driven practices inform real-world applications.

The report describes Customised Employment (CE) as having specific definitions related to the "way CE works". These serve as guidelines for organisations to adhere to when implementing individualised CE strategies and are designed to mitigate the ambiguity surrounding the definition and implementation of CE within the Australian disability employment ecosystem.

The elements of Customised Employment

1. **Community-based employment**

   The individual's employment occurs within the community and in businesses where the proprietors do not provide funded disability support or where people are grouped on the basis of their disability.

2. **Voluntary and mutually beneficial relationships**

   Employment arrangements are established through voluntary, negotiated agreements that benefit both the employee and the business.

3. **Individualised job duties**

   Job duties are determined through personalised negotiation with employers to suit the individual's abilities and preferences.

4. **Tailored employment relationships**

   The employment relationship is customised to accommodate the individual's needs and preferences, ensuring a suitable job match.

5. **Compliance with industrial regulations**

   Remuneration and conditions adhere to the Australian Industrial Relations framework

in accordance with the relevant award or Enterprise or Industry Bargaining Agreement for the negotiated job role.

6. **Representation and negotiation support**

   Employment services staff advocate for the job seeker as needed, facilitating negotiations for custom job descriptions and employment arrangements.

7. **Inclusive approach**

   A qualitative approach is adopted, operating under the assumption that all individuals are capable of working in Community Integrated Employment, fostering an environment of support and encouragement.

8. **Support for self-employment**

   CE extends to supporting individuals in establishing and managing their own businesses or self-employment ventures.

9. **Targeted Support for Vulnerable Jobseekers**

   While applicable across various demographics, CE is particularly beneficial for jobseekers facing challenges accessing traditional employment avenues.

   (WINTAC 2019)

   Author's note: references to industrial arrangements have been adapted to reflect the Australian context.

Elements of Customised Employment strategies

Defining strategies aligned with Customised Employment (CE) is essential for maximising fidelity to the service strategy, establishing an operational framework that guides practice while acknowledging its individualised nature.

1. **Community-based meetings**

   Face-to-face meetings occur in locations within the jobseeker's community.

2. **Rapport building**

   Establish rapport and understanding by investing time to get to know the individual personally.

3. **Active listening**

   Engage in mindful listening to grasp the individual's situation and ensure alignment between the participant's expectations and the service provider's model.

4. **Direct observation**

   Identify the job seeker's interests, skills and abilities through direct observation.

5. **Interviews with stakeholders**

   Conduct comprehensive interviews with the individual's family and friends to gather insights into their interests, skills and abilities.

6. **Community observation**

   Observe the job seeker in various community settings to understand their interests and skills.

7. **Business observations**

   Facilitate opportunities for the job seeker to observe businesses that match their interests, skills and abilities.

8. **Informational interviews**

   Arrange informational interviews with employers in relevant industries to explore potential job opportunities.

9. **Job-related tasks**

   Observe the job seeker engaging in tasks related to potential employment opportunities.

10. **Work experience**

    Assist the job seeker in identifying and participating in work experiences to refine their job interests, skills and abilities, emphasising informed decision-making through exposure and experience.

11. **Collaborative validation**

    Collaborate with the job seeker, family, and friends to confirm their interests, skills and abilities, with their permission.

12. **Customised job description**

    Negotiate and establish a customised job description tailored to the job seeker's strengths and preferences.

13. **Long-term support**

    Provide ongoing on-the-job training and post-placement support as needed to ensure sustained employment success.

    (WINTAC 2019)

Customised Employment (CE) in the Australian disability employment ecosystem involves specific and effective elements and strategies to ensure successful implementation and support for job seekers with disability using Community Integrated Employment (CIE). These elements and strategies aim to address individual needs and preferences while fostering mutually beneficial relationships between job seekers and businesses.

By aligning these elements and strategies, organisations can effectively implement CE through the phases of activity, ensuring meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with disability while fostering inclusive workplaces.

Stage three of the definition

Phases of Customised Employment (CE)

Defining Customised Employment (CE) involves defining the Phases that describe various strategies and sub strategies. It is essential to apply the strategies described within each phase in a manner tailored to the needs of the job seeker. The report notes that the phases aren't exclusively linear nor applied in a one-off manner.

Phase A: Participant Discovery

Participant Discovery is considered the foundational element of CE, serving as the basis for all subsequent job search, setup, support and career development activities. Callahan (undated) coined the term in the early 2000s, and a collaborative group of organisations has refined it since, culminating in the seminal document, "The Essential Elements of Customised Employment for Universal Application" (WINTAC 2019).

Discovery is acknowledged as a capacity-building tool for identifying optimal employment and

arrangements within an Australian context, as outlined in the NDIS Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits Guide document (NDIS 2023).

Discovery involves understanding the job seeker's identity and ideal conditions for successful employment. This is achieved by spending time with the individuals, their families, and other natural supports in environments where they can authentically express themselves. Discovery does not take place within a support agency's office.

It is crucial to emphasise that Discovery is neither evaluative nor comparative; it does not result in a pass or fail judgment on job readiness. This principle underscores CEs belief that all individuals can work; the challenge lies in determining how to facilitate that process, meaning the onus for success lies with the provider, not the participant.

Discovery precedes service or job development, as the latter can only commence once there is a comprehensive understanding of the individual (Callahan 2014).

Three strategies can be employed for Discovery:
- Individual Discovery — facilitated by another individual
- Group-guided Discovery — essentially, peer work (Smith and Stephen 2018).
- Self-guided Discovery — completed by the individual with minimal guidance (Griffin and Hammis 2014).

Job development should only commence once there is a clear understanding of the individual and their optimal conditions for successful employment.

Effective Participant Discovery

At the core of Discovery lies the establishment of explicit expectations and outcomes, predicated on an inaugural meeting that respects the unique circumstances and aspirations of each job seeker. Through immersive engagements within the job seeker's familiar environment, the aim is to cultivate trust, rapport and nuanced comprehension of the job seeker's skills and interests. Fundamental to this process is active listening, extending beyond the individual to encompass their network of familial, social and broader community affiliations.

Effective Discovery encompasses a multifaceted exploration, incorporating in-depth interviews, firsthand observations and collaborative alliances. It underscores the significance of preserving individuals' and representatives' autonomy and consent throughout the entire process, thereby affirming their control in shaping the trajectory of their employment pursuits.

Effective Discovery epitomises a paradigmatic shift in the employment support paradigm, focusing on the richness of each individual's narrative.

Defining effective Participant Discovery

The discovery phase should reflect the following to be successfully used as a means of understanding who the person is and in what environments they are at their best.
- An initial meeting establishes a clear set of expectations and outcomes, along with reporting regimes, based on "where the job seeker is at".
- A focus on qualitative rather than quantitative research procedures.
- A record of outcomes from activities emanating from time spent physically with the jobseeker and those who know them best.
- Meetings occur at locations most familiar to the job seeker, usually beginning in the

jobseeker's home and overwhelmingly based within a jobseeker's community.

- Adequate time is being given to build rapport and get to know the individual.

- Listening to the person and those who know them well is central.

- There is a record of in-depth interviews with family and friends concerning the person's interests, skills and abilities.

- A record of responses from visits with the jobseeker to businesses and organisations exists. These visits aim to identify "what goes on" and thereby enrich the jobseeker's knowledge of industry and business types, creating informed choices.

- A record of observing the person in daily activities in several different community settings.

- While ensuring compliance with the FWC's requirements, the job seeker is assisted in identifying and undertaking work experience opportunities aimed at refining or identifying job interests, skills and abilities and creating informed vocational choices.

- The job seeker is observed engaging in tasks within their community that could assist them in gaining and maintaining employment, such as using public transport, navigating to activities, managing purchases, and identifying and using natural supports.

- Collaboration and dialogue with the job seeker, family, friends and other stakeholders to confirm the job seeker's interests, job interests, skills and abilities are ongoing.

- Ensuring the individual, or people who speak for them, have ownership of the entire process and consent to the form and content of the final review of the records.

(WINTAC 2018; Griffin et al 2007)

Outcomes of an effective Participant Discovery

The outcome of engaging in the Discovery process for jobseekers entails the identification of vocational themes or areas of vocational interest. This process leads to the identification of industry types and, subsequently, organisations that potentially align with the individual's interests, aspirations, and skills (Murphy, S. 2023) (Conversations with Smith, P. and Murphy, S. 2024).

It is essential to resist the temptation to identify job leads until the broad vocational themes immediately and then sub-themes that resonate with the individual have emerged from the Discovery process.

Vocational themes represent overarching categories of interest such as transport, assembly, care, tinkering, history, sport, adventure and communication. Vocational sub-themes denote specific industries where these broad vocational themes manifest, such as administrative centres or offices, veterinary centres, vehicle servicing centres, hospitals, food manufacturers, trade shops and recording studios.

Only after the identification of suitable vocational themes should a list of businesses potentially aligned with the conditions for success, as identified in the Discovery process, be developed for evaluation and contact. This progression from broad areas of interest to specific job leads serves as a safeguard against prematurely selecting job leads based on stereotypical roles or overlooking evidence that may limit certain businesses' suitability.

Adherence to the Discovery model necessitates mindfulness to avoid taking shortcuts by

identifying organisations before completing the evaluative work to determine the conditions for success and suitable vocational themes or job types (Griffin, C. and Smith, P. 2023).

Effective Discovery entails the active involvement of the participant and other stakeholders in the process described above. This involvement can be augmented by leveraging a "Vocational Circle of Support" concept, which harnesses the social capital of the group to identify both general and specific vocational areas that align with the Discovery process and to pinpoint potential organisations that fit.

Involving natural supports also ensures that ownership of the Discovery process and its outcomes rests with the individual and their significant others rather than solely with the service provider (Wilson and Campain 2020).

Phase B: Informational interviews (also known as Organisational Discovery)

Customised Employment (CE) is a dynamic approach that requires practitioners to explore comprehensively not only the job seeker's skills and preferences but also potential employers and organisations. This process, commonly referred to as "informational interviews", serves as a crucial step in understanding the unique dynamics and opportunities within various workplaces. To better capture the essence of this endeavour, we propose the term "Organisational Discovery."

Organisational Discovery involves a systematic inquiry into the inner workings, culture and needs of different businesses and organisations. It is an initiative-taking effort to establish meaningful connections between job seekers and potential employers, laying the groundwork for successful employment outcomes (Griffin et al 2007).

While Organisational Discovery with organisations typically occur after the Discovery process with an individual is completed and vocational themes and sub-themes have been identified, it is essential to recognise that these interviews are not limited to the conclusion of the job seeker's Discovery phase. Instead, they represent an ongoing process that can yield valuable insights at any stage of the employment journey.

Engaging with job seekers in their community presents unique opportunities to discover untapped resources and potential employers. By immersing themselves in the local ecosystem, practitioners can uncover a wealth of information about businesses and organisations that may not be readily apparent through traditional methods. These discoveries can then be documented and leveraged to expand the pool of employment opportunities available to job seekers.

Defining effective Organisational Discovery

The organisational discovery phase should reflect the following to be successfully used as a means of understanding the nature of the organisation as potentially fitting the vocational sub-themes.

- **Alignment with Participant Discovery**
  Organisational profiles should be evaluated against the evidence uncovered during the Participant Discovery process. This ensures that the job seeker's unique skills and preferences are effectively matched with potential employers' needs.

- **Participant-led identification**
  The participant and other stakeholders should drive the identification of organisations to

contact. By empowering job seekers to take an active role in this process and engage with their social capital, practitioners can ensure that their preferences and aspirations are prioritised.

- **Understanding organisational needs**

  It is crucial to recognise that hiring staff is a business decision for organisations. Therefore, the goal of an Informational Interview is not to promote the job seeker but rather to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by the organisation.

- **Preparation and research**

  Before engaging with an organisation, practitioners should conduct thorough research to gather information about its operations, culture and current initiatives. This preparation demonstrates professionalism and enhances the effectiveness of the interaction.

- **Effective communication**

  Having an "elevator pitch" ready for initial contact is essential. However, the focus should be on genuine inquiry and curiosity rather than selling. This approach fosters authentic conversations and promotes meaningful engagement with organisational representatives.

- **Immersive engagement**

  An Organisational Discovery often involves physically spending time within the organisation, especially in its operational areas. This firsthand approach allows practitioners to gain insights into the work environment, workflows and organisational culture.

- **Staff engagement**

  Engaging with staff members who are actively involved in tasks provides valuable insights into the nature of the work area, workflows and informal arrangements. By understanding the perspectives of frontline employees, practitioners can gain a holistic understanding of the organisation's dynamics.

- **Focus on organisation**

  It is essential to keep the conversation centred on the organisation rather than the job seeker. This demonstrates a genuine interest in understanding the organisation's needs and fosters trust and rapport with organisational representatives.

- **Active listening**

  Practitioners should ensure that the organisation's staff are the primary talkers during the interview. By actively listening to their insights and perspectives, practitioners can glean valuable information about the organisation's priorities and challenges.

- **Respect time constraints**

  Setting a time limit with the organisational representative demonstrates professionalism and respect for their busy schedules. Any extensions to the allotted time should be initiated by the employee, ensuring that the conversation remains productive and focused.

- **Value proposition**

  During the interview, practitioners should look for opportunities to highlight potential areas for improvement and efficiency gains within the organisation. By demonstrating the value of their observations, practitioners can position themselves as valuable partners in achieving organisational objectives.

(Griffin 2014; Inge et al 2023)

Connecting discovery to employment

To maintain the evidence-based ethos of Customised Employment within CIE, a comprehensive review of all data collected during Organisational Discovery interviews is essential. This review should align with the outcomes of the participant's Discovery phase, identifying potential employers that offer ideal conditions for mutual success and accommodation possibilities.

The process of identifying potential employers should be driven by a thorough analysis of the data collected during participant and organisational discoveries. This analysis should identify critical factors such as organisational culture, workflow dynamics and accommodation requirements, ensuring that job seekers are matched with employers who offer the best fit for their skills and preferences.

As noted above, it is essential to involve the family and other stakeholders in this process, leveraging their social capital and insights to identify suitable employment opportunities. By soliciting their input and engagement, practitioners can ensure that the employment search is collaborative and aligned with the job seeker's goals and aspirations.

(Inge et al 2023)

Assessing job fit

One of the inherent risks in finding employment for individuals who have been historically excluded from community-based employment is the temptation to accept job offers that may not be a good fit for either the employer or the job seeker. To mitigate this risk, practitioners should adopt a systematic approach to assessing job fit, leveraging tools such as a traffic light system.

The traffic light system provides one structured framework for evaluating potential job opportunities, identifying features that align with the job seeker's aspirations and skills, which are assessed as Green. Barriers that can be addressed through accommodations or support are deemed Amber, and deal breakers that may preclude a successful employment match are designated as Red (Conversations with S. Murphy, Melbourne 2023).

By systematically evaluating job opportunities through this lens, practitioners can ensure that job seekers are placed in roles that offer the best chance for long-term success and fulfilment. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of Customised Employment but also reinforces the principles of evidence-based practice.

As highlighted by Jobsupport's CEO Phil Tuckerman [and Clare Scott—Jobsupport](#), achieving the right job match is paramount for job longevity and sustainability. By rigorously assessing job fit and prioritising quality over quantity, practitioners can ensure that job seekers are placed in roles that offer meaningful opportunities for growth and advancement.

Phase C: Interviews for job design and placement

In the realm of job design and placement, Murphy (2023) emphasises the pivotal role of presenting a compelling business case to endorse an individual as an ideal job candidate. This endorsement, however, is not merely a one-time event but the culmination of a comprehensive process involving thorough acquaintance with the individual, understanding their conditions for success, and aligning these with the needs the businesses have identified.

Crucially, this process entails a collaborative review of collected data involving active consultation with the participant, stakeholders and pertinent colleagues. This mitigates the risk

of isolated decision-making and ensures a holistic perspective.

Moreover, the transition from Organisational Discovery to concrete job leads necessitates consideration of a nuanced approach, often involving strategies such as job carving, job sharing, and job creation. As articulated by Migliore et al (2012), these strategies are tailored solutions that emerge organically from the identified needs unearthed during the Organisational Discovery process. This underscores the importance of customising job roles to fit the unique skill sets and aspirations of the job seeker while addressing the requirements of prospective employers.

Concerns have been raised regarding the ethical implications of this process, particularly the perception of "tricking" a business into employing an individual, commonly referred to as "bait and switch" (Murphy 2023). It is imperative to address these concerns by emphasising the legitimacy of approaching businesses on behalf of job seekers, mindful that the needs of the business have been identified by its staff (Tyree 2024).

Converting informational interviews into tangible job opportunities requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises collaboration, customisation and ethical transparency. By integrating these principles into the job design and placement process, stakeholders can effectively bridge the gap between job seekers and employers, fostering mutually beneficial employment outcomes.

Defining effective CE job negotiation

In today's labour market, employment agencies face the challenge of ensuring mutually beneficial employment relationships. The elements below outline strategies that define CE Job Negotiation.

- The employment agency's staff person who conducted the Informational Interview and Discovery should be the officer who negotiates the possible employment.
- There are explicit links between the skills and aspirations of the job candidate identified during Discovery and the needs and nature of the potential employer discovered during the Organisational Discovery.
- The premise on which the job candidate is employed is based on sound business rationales (For example: making more money, stopping losing money, efficiency)
- The job should be of economic benefit to both the job candidate and the business.
- Specific tasks the job candidate can undertake to address needs identified during the Informational Interview form a critical part of the proposal.
- Savings or increased income are presented to the potential employer as part of the business case.
- The proposal is presented in language familiar to the employer.
- The proposal should comply with all industrial law relevant to the proposed engagement.
- A resumé (which may include a visual resumé) that outlines all the workplaces the job candidate has undertaken work experiences in, including the tasks undertaken, is submitted, highlighting the job candidate's competency.
- In representing the job seeker, the role of the employment agency as an ongoing facilitator and resource is made clear.
- Anticipate and plan for responses and needs.

    (Murphy 2023)

Phase D: Individualised job setup

The customised nature of employment arrangements necessitates significant preparatory time before a new employee commences work. This ensures that the job unfolds in a manner that maximises the likelihood of success for both the job seeker and the employer. The agency's primary responsibility is to establish the conditions conducive to success, as identified through the Discovery process. Staff members must dedicate time at the worksite, engaging in the agreed-upon duties for a sufficient duration to comprehend and document both the formal and informal aspects of the role.

Job setups entail comprehensive documentation that delineates the job and tasks in detail, specifying the quality and quantity of expected outcomes, as well as the immediate and long-term support and training arrangements. Additionally, logistical aspects, such as workdays, break times, union requirements, supervisory lines and even informal activities, like football tipping, must be identified.

While these processes may not always be visible in the workplace, they serve as guiding frameworks, ensuring that training aligns with actual needs and is delivered in a manner that fosters natural relationships among new employees and their co-workers.

Critical to the success of this process is the precise definition of roles for each party — participant (and their family stakeholders), employer, and support agency — before employment commences (Kregel et al, 2020).

Another pivotal aspect of individualised job setup is the identification and documentation of employability factors or soft skills, often referred to as workplace culture. This involves recognising both task-related and non-task-related elements, such as post-task check-ins or end-of-day routines.

Documentation of workplace culture extends to identifying natural supports, celebrating achievements, site-specific conventions and informal communication styles within and across work sites. Gathering this data necessitates time spent on the operational floor, as such aspects are often implicit and not formally documented (Riches and Green 2003).

This information is encapsulated in the following Elements of Good Job Design.

Defining effective CE job design
- An individual Position Description is developed, noting the specific tasks agreed upon.
- Specific documentation is produced for the stakeholders, reflecting the needs, scope, or responsibility of each party.
- Requirements as prescribed under industrial law are recognised, and actions to meet them are completed.
- The task, sequence, and time tasks undertaken during the working day are recorded.
- The quality and outputs required for each task are documented.
- Logistical data is noted (days and hours of work and start and finish times, break times, pay details, union engagement, social club membership, and so on)
- Any WH and S implications are noted, and strategies are agreed upon, so they are met.
- The role of the support agency is described in a manner that maximises the inclusion and participation of the new employee in the workforce. The employee is a part of the business, not the support agency.

- Natural supports are identified, legitimised and supported to ensure the active involvement of co-workers in supporting the new employee.
- The training arrangements are described, including how achievements of agreed benchmarks are recorded and communicated.
- The rationale and process of fading out and in of training supports are described, noting its intensity and how individualised extended ongoing support is provided to all parties.
- Factors that increase employability are noted. Cleanliness, punctuality, uniforms, use of mobile phones etc)
- The cultural and operational elements of the organisation are recorded.
- Urgent and routine communication strategies are understood.

  (Symonds, Koomarri, Possibility 2018–21; Callahan (undated))

Phase E: On-the-job training and ongoing support

On-the-job training

Long-term, personalised on-the-job support and training, along with ongoing assistance, are acknowledged as essential components of Customised Employment (CE), particularly for individuals with high and complex support needs. The centrality of on-the-job training and ongoing support through the CE model has been emphasised, indicating that intensive initial engagement, coupled with a structured training approach, is crucial for individuals to gain and maintain employment (Kregel et al 2020).

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) recognises this as a viable and successful strategy. It aligns with the upfront investment principle of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which prioritises initial time and resource allocation to enable more minor interventions as the participant gains independence (Stakeholder conversations, February 2024).

Successful outcomes are notably influenced by the delivery of training and support by skilled personnel versed in the principles of Systematic Instruction. Furthermore, staff should possess knowledge of image and competency-enhancing strategies to ensure awareness of how training and support activities validate the individual's role as an employee (Tryee 2024).

Conversations with provider stakeholders who offer Disability Employment Services (DES), and NDIS employment support revealed a common perception. Providers often equated "ongoing support" with periodic check-ins, either in-office or via phone, which tended to be more conversational. One stakeholder likened this practice to "place and pray" (Stakeholder conversations, March 2024).

Research indicates that on-the-job training, as opposed to offsite generalised training, is significantly more advantageous for individuals with cognitive impairments. This preference arises from difficulties in skill transfer between environments or in generalising subject matter (Wehman et al 2020). Real-time, on-site training not only adheres to the "place and train" methodologies developed by Gold and others but also aligns with evidence-based practices for success (The CIE 2023).

Reports on CIE emphasise the limited value of offsite foundational courses aimed at improving work skills. A study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research revealed that only 12 per cent of individuals who completed foundational VET-aligned courses secured

employment (Kregel et al 2020).

Collectively, the following defines good on-the-job training.

Defining effective CE on-the-job training

- The training staff have recorded the expectations, requirements, logistics (including elements external to the worksite) and natural supports and resources of the customised job and worksite before the new employee begins by having done the role for at least a work cycle.
- All on-site training is based on activities and expectations agreed to by all stakeholders; recognising training should recognise factors beyond the completion of tasks.
- All parties clearly understand the role of the support agency in providing on-the-job training.
- The job training takes a holistic strategy, recognising the validity of hard and soft employability skills.
- The job training supports and fosters natural support, both in the worksite and across other areas outside the worksite, which impacts a successful employment outcome.
- On-the-job training recognises and uses training methodologies applicable to the client group.
- Training occurs as close as possible in time and space to where the activity will take place.
- Staff are aware of and competent in the provision of models of training.
- The fading out or in of on-the-job training is based on data and is agreed upon by all stakeholders before it occurs.
- The job training data informs where, where and when training resources are applied.
- The job training involves all the stakeholders that need to be involved, including those external to the worksite.

    (RRTC website

    JobSupport — conversations

    Report author's practice notes Koomarri and Possability IDV 2018–22)

Ongoing support

Wehman (2020) highlights the significance of customer-centred, long-term support in enhancing an employee's capacity to take on additional duties, adapt to protocol changes, and pursue advancement within an organisation. Similarly, Inclusion Australia (Wilson et al 2022) emphasises the enduring need for support among individuals with intellectual disability throughout their working lives, underscoring the necessity for ongoing assistance, which may fluctuate but must remain available indefinitely.

Moreover, personal experiences in providing support reveal the essentiality of individualised and flexible ongoing assistance for individuals with complex support requirements. Despite this recognition, empirical evidence suggests that the provision of long-term ongoing support tailored to individuals' needs is not consistently applied or standardised across organisations.

Conversations with stakeholders, including those involved in both large Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) and integrated community employment programs, underscore the challenges faced by individuals transitioning to community-based integrated employment.

For instance, stakeholders reported instances where individuals attempted community-based employment but encountered insufficient personalised ongoing support, leading to job failure (Conversation with stakeholder 2024).

The advocacy group Our Voice Australia (OVA) highlights the testimony of a family member to the Disability Royal Commission, detailing a failed attempt at community-based employment due to mismatched job roles, inability to complete tasks, and inadequate workplace induction. The understandable result was isolation and loneliness, prompting a return to the ADE (OVA 2022).

The author of this report reflects on experiences managing an ADE where a small number of individuals had secured community-based integrated employment some years prior to his engagement. However, due to the lack of ongoing support and on-the-job training, these community-based employment endeavours failed. A review of the process noted that the circumstances that led to the job losses were created by poorly planned and implemented support practices rather than inherent unsuitability to CIE for the person supported (Author 2022).

Research corroborates the importance of ongoing support, including on-the-job training, in achieving successful employment outcomes. Kregel et al (2020) assert that initiative-taking follow-up practices can prevent issues leading to job loss, such as ill-fitting roles, social isolation, and failure to adapt to changing support needs or external factors impacting performance.

The elements of good ongoing support are encapsulated in the following.

Defining effective CE ongoing support

- There is an understanding that ongoing support may involve long-term engagement with the participant, their family, and others, along with the business, and all clearly understand this.
- The agency recognises and plans for factors external to the job site that may impact job retention or development.
- There is recognition that worksites change in regard to personnel, tasks, location, and viability, and engagement in a worksite minimises the element of surprise.
- Ongoing support recognises known events that may impact the employees' capacity in the workplace and prepares for them in advance, but it is also prepared for out-of-the-blue events.
- Ongoing support uses and builds on existing and new relationships across all stakeholder groups.
- Ongoing support recognises that an employee's vocational interests and skills change over time. Career development within the existing employer or in a new business is a natural part of the support agency's role.
- Ongoing support occurs primarily in worksites or the individual's community.
- The size of the ongoing support staff's caseload will align with the needs of the supported employee.
- Ongoing support is not staff member-centric. The agency knows the ongoing Support arrangements for all the individuals it assists.
- Any change in on-the-job support (personnel, activity, frequency, focus) is driven by

recorded data.

- Regular reviews of job support are undertaken to ensure it is relevant and adequate.
- Changed aspirations, skills and needs may trigger a revised or modified Discovery process.

(WINTAC 2018, Author's Author's notes Koomarri and Possability 2018–22)

Deliverable one recommendations: Define models of Customised Employment

The understanding and implementation of the Customised Employment model are immature in Australia. There is limited commonality of understanding of what CE is and isn't.

Through an extensive review of available literature and a range of conversations with subject matter experts, practitioners, representatives of users of the model and funding bodies, the report is confident in recommending the following in defining Customised Employment within the Australian disability employment context to provide a baseline in the sector marketplace to enable a mutual understanding of CE by providers, service model participants and consumers and legislative and governance entities.

- Customised Employment is recognised as a practice strategy within the framework known as Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE). This, in turn, sits within the Australian definition of "Supported Employment", which covers a number of employment arrangements.

- The descriptor of Customised Employment is adopted as the Australian benchmark, recognising the universality of the definition.

- The three Principles underpinning CE are recognised as critical elements of its successful implementation.

- To deliver effective Customised Employment, the Elements of CE and Effective CE Practice are adopted, ensuring the CE model moves past a simple definition to one that has a defined framework of practice.

- That CE is made up of four phases, and each has its own descriptor of good practice.

Deliverable two: Review time frame and indicative model cost

This project deliverable examines the intricacies of the four distinct phases of CE implementation: discovery, informational interviews, job development, and post-placement planning and support. Its examination underscores the importance of understanding the Elements of CE and Good Practice relevant to each phase, as this knowledge is crucial for the delivery of effective services.

Since the inception of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2016, many short-term CE-aligned pilot initiatives have been launched, typically funded through Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grants. However, these initiatives have often adopted varying interpretations of CE, leading to a fragmented service landscape, with limited learning and knowledge dissemination. There has been a recurring focus across the sector on establishing foundational elements of CE rather than advancing data-informed practices conducive to sustainable outcomes (Conversations with stakeholders 2024).

The report's examination of stakeholder feedback and documentation underscores CEs current status as an aspirational yet under-documented model of practice within the Australian disability sector. Notably, there is a shortage of documented understanding regarding the costs and time frames associated with CE activities, hindering the practice's evolution towards greater efficacy and sustainability (Conversations with stakeholders Feb and April 2024).

The report seeks to address these gaps by synthesising stakeholder insights and empirical evidence to provide actionable recommendations for advancing CE as a cornerstone of disability service provision in Australia.

Australian disability employment ecosystem

The disability employment sector is in a state of flux, with numerous policy and program guidelines that may impact the time frames and pricing of CE under review or in development. The blended payments trial, which has a direct impact on this element of the project, is yet to begin. The exposure draft of the new Disability Employment Services (DES) model after June 2025 has not yet been made public. This ongoing process directly impacts any medium to longer-term recommendations that this report may offer (DSS 2024).

Market and Scheme stewardship

The federal government aims to establish a policy and operational framework for employment services to manage costs and ensure market stewardship and governance effectively. This approach seeks to prevent the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, as highlighted extensively in the Disability Royal Commission's final report. [Final report - Executive Summary, our vision for an inclusive Australia and Recommendations.pdf (royalcommission.gov.au)](#) The Commission's vision for an inclusive Australia, along with its recommendations, underscores the imperative for comprehensive market oversight.

The report recognises the Federal Government's commitment to building a sustainable National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), both financially and operationally. Through a 10-point plan announced in April 2023, the government pledged $720 million towards this objective and set

an annual growth target for the NDIS at 8 per cent National Cabinet commits to a sustainable NDIS | Department of Social Services Ministers (dss.gov.au).

Furthermore, the NDIS Independent Review identified potential revisions to the Scheme's funding arrangements to align with its intended outcomes. The review highlighted a fundamental tension between the fee-for-service payment model and the imperative to invest in longer-term strategies that foster and create social and economic participation.

The NDIS review noted, "The fee-for-service payment approach rewards higher levels of activity, usually support hours. This approach encourages short-term transactional relationships in service delivery rather than rewarding providers for investing in the capability of participants to reduce their ongoing needs for formal support." 1. NDIS markets are not delivering on responsive and innovative service delivery | NDIS Review

The latest NDIS School Leaver Employment Support (SLES) Outcome data for the year ending 30 June 2023, exemplify the concerns arising regarding the efficacy of current funding and support hours arrangements to meet these objectives despite assisting individuals for up to two years at a rate of up to $22,000 per year.

Of the 165 organisations delivering SLES, seventy-one providers (43 per cent) achieve no outcomes of community-based integrated employment.
(NDIS 2023, Conversation with stakeholder 2024)

These low outcomes may be attributable in part to a funding model that prioritises engagement over tangible outcomes, imprecise expectations, and a lack of effective service practices. Addressing these challenges necessitates re-evaluating existing approaches to better align with the desired outcomes of the Disability Employment sector.

This report postulates the results show the most important driver of low outcomes isn't time or funding as has been suggested, but the application of models of service unsuited to the needs of the individuals.

Review of an appropriate time frame

Discussions with stakeholders, both within and external to the project, have revealed a significant divergence in perspectives regarding reasonable time frames for completing project phases. Moreover, organisations employ various approaches concerning charge rates and quoted or sought-after time allocations for activities.

The report found expectations of time to gain an outcome differed between families self-managing or plan-managing their NDIS funds when engaging with a provider utilising CE strategy and those engaging with an SLES-funded operation delivered by a DES, with the anticipation of transitioning into the highly regulated DES program. Conversations with stakeholders (2024) underscore this diversity of viewpoints.

Participant-controlled funding is a significant feature of the NDIS landscape. The NDIA's December 2023 Quarterly Report highlights the breakdown of management approaches for individual plans:

- self-managed: 29 per cent
- plan-managed: 62 per cent.
- agency-managed: nine per cent
  (NDIS 2023)

The trend towards participant control over annual funding packages may lead to a more diverse and creative range of services, including CE. The report sees this as an outcome that should be given qualified support, based on the outcomes of person centred paid employment the model and strategies gain.

While the NDIA aims to offer participants a variety of service options, the report suggests that diversity without data identifying and supporting effective practices could increase underperformance in the employment sector. The degree of choice and control in the utilisation of funded supports is expected to increase significantly after 1 July 2024.

Bennet and Orban noted in an article published on the Pearls and Irritations website At last, the battle to save the NDIS has begun - Pearls and Irritations (johnmenadue.com)

> "The level of funding a person gets in their NDIS budget will be 'reasonable and necessary', not the individual supports they are currently funded for. In other words, 'reasonable and necessary' will now refer to your spending cap. How you spend the money will be (mostly) up to you."

This strategy reflects the NDIA's commitment to a person-centred approach, emphasising that service, not program, should be tailored to individual needs at any given time. Consequently, the practice arrangements will be subject to negotiation between participants, families and providers.

This level of "choice and control" contrasts starkly with the prescriptive timelines and funding levels of the DES program as described DES guidelines. Disability Employment Services Guidelines | Department of Social Services, Australian Government (dss.gov.au)

Provider stakeholders have highlighted the challenge of establishing expectations for time frames and indicative costs for phases of CE for prospective job seekers. They emphasised the significant differences in individuals' life experiences, community engagement, social capital, external expectations and the impact of impairments. It has been noted setting arbitrary time frames could exclude individuals who may require significant support.

A stakeholder described the funding arrangements under NDIS as being like "lots of little block grants where you work out what happens with the participant and their family within broad funding arrangements" (Conversations with stakeholders 2024).

The report notes low SLES outcomes data reflect, in part, the practitioner's emphasis on meeting timelines over providing quality service. Top-performing agencies prioritise outcomes supported by data-informed practices rather than merely expending available time (NDIS 2023, Conversation with stakeholder 2024).

Data observations

A review of stakeholder feedback, publications, and organisational literature regarding time and funding for phases of activity often reflects the 'American experience.' This understandable focus is due to the limited availability of evidence-based commentary relevant to Australia.

The discussions on timelines and funding CE strategies may be of limited value without data from Australian sources and by not recognising the constrained funding arrangements within individual US states where suggested time frames for activity are often drawn from.

The US experience means support for participants with more complex support needs in the Discovery stage of CE, (such as establishing work experiences) is at times delivered with "day

services funding" across a number of states as a work around to low levels of CE related funding (and therefore time limits) set for Discovery (Conversations with Murphy 2023–24; Stakeholder 2024).

Conversations with stakeholders conducted in March 2023 and April 2024 also underscore a predominant emphasis on the Discovery phase, with limited to no consideration on subsequent phases such as Job Development and Post Placement Planning and Support. Notably, only two stakeholders engaged in detailed discussions regarding the time frames and funding requirements for phases beyond the Discovery element of CE during these conversations (Conversations with Stakeholders 2024).

The report identified a solitary instance within Australian literature where peer-reviewed descriptors delineate aspects of time allocation for all stages of activity emerging from Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) practice. This report highlighted service activity aligned to CE across the organisation's CIE model spanning a decade (Kregel et al 2020).

The organisation highlighted a number of initial activities, encompassing a functional or situational assessment culminating in a mutually agreed plan endorsed by both the service provider and the client. The activities also encompassed a formal process of job-client matching, along with a comprehensive job analysis involving job redesign, task analysis, and mutual agreement on rates, quality standards, and supervision requisites, necessitating an average duration of 108 hours per client.

The organisation's report evaluates the one-on-one onsite training until the client attains the predetermined proficiency benchmarks (kpi) and seamlessly integrates into the workplace where supervision responsibilities transition to the supervisor or designated co-worker; that is, the natural support in the workplace. This phase entails an average commitment of 72 hours per participant, equivalent to approximately 6.9 weeks for onsite training.

Again, the report underscores the importance of sustained follow-up support for both the client and the employer post-employment inception, noting an average of 9.6 hours per month of Ongoing Support after the initial twelve months of employment (Kregel et al 2020).

This report advocates for tailored support, aligned with individual needs throughout the employment continuum. It underscores that the outcomes of meaningful CIE emerging from skilful application of CE aligned strategies stem from practices informed by empirical data, delivered by engaged and skilled staff, not arbitrarily imposed homogenous and rigid time frames.

Another stakeholder shared their experience regarding the transition time to phases beyond Discovery. They noted that it took three weeks for an individual who received support for a self-discovery process to secure employment. Conversely, another individual with high and complex support needs took a year to move through this process (Conversation with stakeholder 2024).

These two examples highlight the level of complexity individuals bring to the process and the potential for negative consequences as a result of attempting to homogenise the CE processes based around time frames over data informed, skilfully applied models of service, appropriate to the people being served.

Reviewing indicative model costs

A review of literature, websites, and publicity material, as well as feedback from stakeholders and other providers considering service transformation, highlights how the NDIS employment

sector is responding to the pricing structure.

NDIS pricing framework

The hourly rate documented in the NDIS Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits (2023–24) are prescribed in a number of support categories and items.

- **Supports in Employment** proscribe an hourly rate of $65.47 for a range of activities once an individual is in work. These would link to CE phases of On-the-Job Training and Ongoing Support.
- **Finding and keeping a job** prescribes an hourly rate of $74.63 under its Workplace Assistance Support item. The activities described in the item align with Discovery and some elements of Job Set up.
- **School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES)** is undergoing Review but has traditionally been funded at $22,000 a year for up to two years.
- **Employment Related Assessment and Counselling Support** funds higher level Workplace Counselling activities. This allows providers to charge an hourly rate of $193.00. However, that work must involve an allied health professional or an individual with counselling qualifications.

  (NDIS 2023)

NDIS provider's response to pricing structures

Pricing structures and levels is part of a broader discussion on sector viability, as outlined in the NDS 2023 State of the Sector report. The report indicates that 34 per cent of member organisations experienced losses, while 18 per cent broke even in the preceding fiscal year (NDS 2023).

Feedback from NDIS providers and stakeholders notes the hourly rate for Assistance to Access Community Social and Recreational Activities, set at $65.47 per hour. This rate mirrors that of On-the-Job Training and Ongoing Support in worksites.

Organisations, particularly legacy Disability organisations, offering or intending to offer CIE and CE are responding to financial pressures in the following ways:

- **Selecting NDIS Support lines that allow billing at higher rates**

  Examples include SLES, Innovative Community Practice or Workplace Counselling and Assessment. Stakeholders and providers alike express interest in hourly charge rates ranging from $100 to $135 per hour for services like Discovery informational interviews, job setup and design, and initial on-the-Job Training.

- **Opting out of delivering CE (and employment supports)**

  This decision is motivated by the realisation that similar income could be generated from lower-skilled staff simply accompanying a participant for activities like getting a cup of coffee.

- **Acknowledging the significance of employment as an outcome for people with disability**

  This recognition entails incurring losses due to the need to deploy higher-skilled (and higher-paid) staff, often subsidised by costs from other programs.

- **Leveraging alternative funding sources such as ILC grants** to support operations.

This report highlights that individuals in group day services typically receive annual budgets

ranging from $30,000 to $35,000, with limited capacity to reduce reliance on formal support services. This disparity in funding for participants who are looking to achieve a level of personal and financial independence through CIE over those who have chosen not (or not been able to) reduce their draw on NDIS funding has implications for the future of the NDIS.

Conversations with the NDIA noted the funding averages for the ADE cohort are too variable to draw system wide conclusions from. However, the report's author has personal experience of managing ADE's over three states where the Supports in Employment funding ranged from $17,000 to 22,000 per person per annum primarily for a three- to four-day working week over 48 weeks of the year. One ADE had support funding in the range of $30,000 to $40,000 per person (Conversations with stakeholders 2024; The CIE 2020; Report author, CEO and State Manager of three organisations offering day and ADE services).

DES and ESS: Defining a timeline and indicative model costs.

The mainstream Disability Employment Services (DES) program presents significant complexity. It adopts a programmatic perspective and alters the dynamics between providers and participants in funded activities. Participants and their families, as well as the organisations involved, have minimal influence over payment scheduling and the duration of activity phases.

DES operates within defined time frames and funding structures. For instance, during the job-seeking phase, which spans up to 78 weeks, DES service fees are prepaid for a participant across six consecutive 13-week periods while they receive Employment Assistance or Extended Employment Assistance. These service fees cease once the participant secures employment (DSS 2023).

The amount of funding varies based on the participant's assessed level of need, categorised into five payment levels ranging from $782.92 to $1642.71 for every 13-week period. These payment levels underscore the challenges faced by DES in conducting individualised Discovery and informational interviews, as outlined in previous sections of this report.

DES also incentivises employment attainment and retention through its outcome-based payment system, which rewards job sustainability up to the 52-week work anniversary. Similar to the service fee structure, payment amounts are determined by assessed support needs and the hours of employment secured (DSS 2023).

Notably, DES ESS acknowledges the unique challenges faced by individuals with moderate intellectual disability, offering a loading on Outcome Fees for achieving employment milestones, subject to specific conditions outlined in the guidelines (DSS 2021).

Furthermore, DES provides indefinite ongoing support, remunerated monthly, with payment levels contingent upon assessed support needs. The report notes that the two highest performing SLES providers all conduct individualised job assessment (Discovery) and informational interviews or job search within the NDIS environment while on-the-job training and ongoing support is funded through the DES program (Conversations with stakeholder April 2024).

The DES program is governed by 54 separate multipage guidelines and an extensive contract, tightly defining the relationship between providers and the Department of Social Services (Disability Employment Services Guidelines | Department of Social Services, Australian Government (dss.gov.au)).

Ensuring adequate funding for NDIS participants' annual budgets

Given the fixed timing and payment structure of the DES program, the focus of the report is evaluating the need for a sufficient budget for NDIS participants seeking CE as an employment strategy, which lies primarily within the NDIS framework.

Stakeholder feedback, including input from support coordinators and the author's past interactions with providers and families, highlights a call for greater consistency in the allocation and amount of funding for Employment Support within individual annual plans.

Stakeholders, including support coordinators and others (Conversations with stakeholders April 2024), have voiced concerns that the provision of funding for employment supports beyond an ADE for some individuals by NDIS planning staff may not be deemed 'reasonable and necessary', underscoring the impact of value-laden low expectations.

The report makes the note that, based off NDIS data noted earlier in the report on the significant growth for Assistance to Access Community, Social and Recreational Activities and the comments by stakeholders (April 2024), this funding line represents the second biggest funded activity area.

The CEO of Inclusion Australia, Catherine McAlpine, commented at the DRC noted the 'polished pathway for people with an Intellectual Disability post school as being to segregated employment and housing. The author also notes the size of the funding allocated to non-work activities may mean the statement should also include reference to segregated day programs being a significant element of the 'polished pathway'. ([News: Fri 22 Apr 2022 - NSW Inclusive Education Policy: Good... Family Advocacy (family-advocacy.com)](https://family-advocacy.com)).

This perception may stem from low expectations of NDIS participants or a lack of understanding regarding the requirements for crafting, implementing and maintaining an effective person-centred employment plan.

The impact of low expectations is universally noted as one of the most significant barriers to universal access to Community-based Employment across both the US and Australia (Conversations with Murphy, S. 2023–24, The CIE 2020).

The Disability Royal Commission has also recognised challenges in planners' comprehension and acceptance of open and integrated employment. This issue warrants attention from the NDIA. As recommended by the Commission, the agency should:

Provide training for Local Area Coordinators, National Disability Insurance Agency planners, and support coordinators.

- The training should focus on building knowledge, resources, and capacity to:
  – Encourage participants to prioritise employment goals in open and integrated settings as the first option.
  – Identify appropriate supports available to achieve open employment goals.

  (Australian Government 2022)

Conversations with the NDIA (Stakeholder 22 April 2024) noted the agency's interest in providing not only increased training for Planners on their role in supporting community-based employment for all but to also explore the option of expanding a set yearly amount based on SLES funding for people up to 35, noting this would bridge the period until the outcome of the blended payment trial in 2026.

Deliverable two recommendations: Review time frame and indicative model cost

The existing evidence highlights a fundamental challenge in establishing clear time frames and pricing structures for the phases of Customised Employment (CE). The evidence highlights a lack of consensus on what constitutes CE, what defines good practice within it and, crucially, how these elements translate into person-centred day-service arrangement informed by data.

The report underscores the scarcity of peer-reviewed Australian-based data during its time-limited review of literature, documents and stakeholder discussions. This scarcity severely limits our ability to determine appropriate time frames and pricing models within a person-centred service approach where each individual's need is assessed.

Furthermore, the report highlights ongoing trials and reviews of funding models, including efforts to integrate Disability Employment Services (DES) with the Supported Employment elements of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). An exposure draft for the DES program after July 2025 is also expected, which may address some of these issues. It also recognised NDIA's interest in establishing a benchmark funding package until these reviews have been completed.

Given these factors, but recognising the need for funding certainty, the report proposes an interim solution.

- Until evaluations of relevant trials are completed, the report recommends that NDIS Planners allocate $22,000, for the employment-related elements of the annual plan for each new NDIS jobseeker per year.

- The report stresses that employment funding is not to be automatically removed as a plan expires, because participant circumstances and availability of adequate matching supports may influence the client's capacity to invest in employment-related activities.

- The report also stresses the importance of ongoing stakeholder engagement, participant choice and control over funding use, and the limited data available for establishing more explicit time frames and outcomes.

- Therefore, it recommends implementing a "checkpoint for completion" of the Discovery process after either 10 hours of service or monthly, whichever comes first, with the provider and participant or stakeholder.

- These checkpoint discussions should centre on outcomes aligned with the Elements of Good Practice and as described in the Participant and Service Provider Service Agreement.

- That NDS establish a methodology to collect data on the time each phase takes to complete and supports its members offering CE to complete the data collection.

- This field data is used to inform organisations on average times activities may take.

- The report notes this activity appears aligned to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence's proposed role and, so, it is recommended any data NDS collect is transferred to the centre once it becomes operational.

Deliverable three: Development of a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes aligned to CE model of service

There are challenges in developing a data collection framework for outcomes aligned to the CE service strategy, when, as the report has noted, the definition of CE and the elements of the service model were and still are unclear and currently mean many things to many people (Scope Undated).

The report recognised that providing a simple definition of the model was inadequate. There was a recognition that to begin to build an Australian focussed data informed practice strategy there needed to be a clear understanding of the how of CE as well as the what. Only then could a robust and comprehensive data framework be created that linked back to the higher-level elements of the model.

The development of a data framework for CE that supports high levels of outcomes by measuring both the qualitive and quantitative elements of the model is critical to move it past its description of currently being a 'beneficial intervention worthy of continued scientific examination' (Wehman 2023).

A review of the literature describing CE processes and outcomes both in Australia and the US highlights Customised Employment (CE) practice lacks comprehensive data, beyond the anecdotal, that ensures fidelity to its model and that has been a concern persisting over 20 years in the US. Despite being labelled a "promising practice" in US literature, there remains limited data supporting CE as an evidence-based employment approach that support CIE (Inge et al 2018).

Research by US researcher Tim Riesen, who has evaluated this issue for many years, highlights this gap. It notes that existing studies often describe CE without providing substantial evidence for evaluation. In a review of CE literature from 2001 to 2015, he noted only 10 out of 25 published articles included outcome data for participants (Riesen et al 2019).

San Francisco-based CE Trainer and recognised Subject Matter Expert with the US Department of Labour, Sara Murphy, notes there has been little qualitative research into data and outcomes frameworks, meaning Australian organisations' capacity to draw on the work of more mature systems is limited (Conversation Murphy 2024)

Yet, many commentators note the efficacy of CE by drawing attention to anecdotal outcomes. The review of outcomes emerging from a study into participants with ASD who engaged in a program run by RRTC from 2009 to 2014 using Customised Employment is often cited in the literature. This study found that 63 of 64 participants found employment using CE. However, this report notes the review is now eight years old (Wehman et al 2016).

The Australian context mirrors these challenges. The development of CE within Australia has primarily involved short-term, disconnected pilot programs, hindering the establishment of comprehensive evaluation practices.

As noted earlier in the report, there has been an emphasis on the establishment phase of the CE model of service within these pilots, with resources often consumed in selecting

staff, defining roles and setting up support arrangements. Data frameworks and collection of material (and its evaluation) is a secondary activity. This again mirrors the US experience, with the majority of articles being descriptive in nature and "primarily focused summarising implementation procedures without including a research design or participant data' (Wehman 2023).

The report is aware of soon-to-be published evaluations into some of the pilots but notes their models of practice use some elements of the definition of CE highlighted earlier in the report while utilising others that don't (Stakeholders 2024).

The report's review of Australian literature to determine the existence of a consistent data framework applicable to all CE phases identified two noteworthy documents. Both offering a comprehensive review of outcome methodologies aligned with the report's CE definition.

The subject of one of the reports describes its model as "Competitive Integrated Employment" (CIE). However, this report notes the organisation's service strategies share significant similarities with CE. The development of what is now a mature data framework has enabled long-term DES provider Jobsupport, which specialises in servicing people with a moderate ID, to implement evidence-based practices that support its operations and produce high levels of employment outcomes for participants. The Jobsupport website (http://www.Our Results - Jobsupport) publishes data on outcomes for its three offices. Given most of its operations are funded through the DES system, it understandably defines outcomes in terms of jobs gain and kept.

Dr Peter Smith and Professor Trevor Parmenter propose an outcome framework rooted in social quality theory to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disability beyond a numerical accumulation of job gained and kept. This framework is based on measuring the impact of employment across four domains: social inclusion, social cohesion, socio-economic security and self-determination. These are notable outcomes of securing employment, with an emphasis on quality employment.

They note the current performance framework and the data set that underpins it is focussed exclusively on process and provider success "with little understanding of the impact of employment practice on the individual". They note the current outcomes framework rewards providers with job outcomes, leading to organisations extracting data to inform practices that sees some participants arbitrarily deemed "not work ready" being "parked" and with those that are being "creamed" or fast-tracked (Smith, P. and Parmenter, T. 2023). This experience was consistently noted by family-aligned stakeholders (Conversations with Stakeholders 2024).

Other literature that considers data collection to promote successful outcomes take a more focussed evaluation of a part of the CE process. Professor Vivienne Riches highlights critical success factors for promoting social inclusion in workplaces, offering valuable insights for creating a data framework for the often-overlooked on-the-job training and ongoing support elements of CE practice (Riches and Green 2003). This paper notes quality elements beyond task capacity in maintaining employment, such as strategies to enhance social integration among other factors, leading to consideration of a wider data collection framework than previously used in employment.

The University of Melbourne, in collaboration with CDERP and Griffin Hammis, is developing a fidelity scale for Discovery, a crucial component of CE. Although unpublished, this initiative aims to provide standardised data sources for the Discovery phase. This builds on earlier work of Discovery fidelity done by Griffin Hammis and others (Hall 2028).

Sara Murphy notes there has been little qualitative research into data and outcomes frameworks, meaning Australian organisations capacity to draw on the work of more mature systems is limited (Conversation Murphy, S. 2024).

Data framework in Australian Disability Employment Services

Disability Employment Services (DES) — ESS

Historically, Disability Employment Services (DES) in Australia have relied on a data collection and outcome framework primarily focused on quantitative data. Simply put, this framework, epitomised by the now-defunct DES Star Rating system, measured job acquisition and retention against the influx of job seekers entering the service within a given time frame. The data framework played a significant role in managing providers' ongoing engagement with the Federal Department of Social Services.

Following the discovery of flaws in the star rating system's methodology in late 2022 and its subsequent abolition by Minister Rishworth in October 2023, the Federal Government, as part of its overhaul of the DES program after 2025, introduced a new quality management framework through the Department of Social Services (DSS) in July 2023.

The DES Quality Framework outlines three key performance indicators (KPIs) as the foundation of the program's performance assessment:
- KPI 1: efficiency
- KPI 2: effectiveness
- KPI 3: quality

The Quality Framework notes these KPIs collectively drive performance, integrity and quality, complemented by targeted assurance and compliance measures. Providers are expected to use the DES Quality Framework to enhance performance, their service delivery and feedback mechanisms, and ensure the provision of quality outcomes for participants.

This report observes the tenor of the quality framework is holistic and person-centred, noting the framework also includes social and economic outcomes in its definition of quality (DSS 2023).

The framework highlights five provider practices conducive to high-quality service delivery. These practices are participant-focused and describe high-level strategies that align to both person centred CIE and CE practice.

To emphasis this, the report notes the Quality Framework cites the importance of customised job placements, tailored job-design and a focus on creating community connections in high-quality service and outcomes. These descriptors and the Quality Framework's four Elements of Good Practice align with the Elements of Good CE Practice described earlier in the report, and begin to draw together consideration of relevant data sets to support the DES Quality Framework and CE Definition (DSS 2023).

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) faces a different environment in the development of a comprehensive data framework aimed at driving performance and fostering service development within its operations. Unlike Disability Employment Services (DES),

where provider selection is bound by contractual arrangements with the Department of Social Services (DSS), the NDIA operates within a participant-centric model. Participants engage with a diverse marketplace of service providers to fulfil their funded goals, resulting in a multitude of selection factors, of which an evaluation of data-informed, quality services are only one aspect of the purchasing decision-making. Notably, in the provision of Supports in Employment funding arrangement, the NDIA permits entities, regardless of registration status with the agency, or model of practice to offer services.

With the exception of performance data emanating from funded activities described as the School Leavers Employment Supports, the NDIA maintains a hands-off approach in addressing perceived deficiencies in expected outcomes. Feedback from the NDIA underscores its funding framework nature rather than a prescriptive programmatic model based on common usage data sets as found within the DES program. The NDIA sees data as "sending signals to the sector" rather than directing what the service model to be used should look like (Conversations with Stakeholder Feb and April 2024)

Unlike DES, where programmatic data drives funding and contractual engagement between DSS and providers, the NDIS operates under an individual–provider relationship. Participants engage in meetings with NDIS planners armed with a variety of potentially relevant evidence sources to drive purchasing decisions. Securing, maintaining or adjustments of funding may or may not result from these interactions, reflecting the individualised nature of the scheme.

In their response to the NDIA's request for submissions to the Quality and Safeguarding Framework in 2015, Fyffe and Bigby note that there is an expectation NDIS participants become "wise shoppers" in selecting services by gathering formal and informal information about service effectiveness (Fyffe Bigby 2015).

The continued patronage of the significant number of providers offering SLES services that produced low or no outcomes of work and for foundational VET "get ready" style courses, which record consistently low outcomes of getting people into community-based work, raises the question as to whether that outcome has been achieved in any meaningful way (The CIE 2020, Kregel, J. et al 2020).

The continuance of low performing NDIS providers of School Leaver Supports also suggests little interest or capacity to use a data framework to drive organisational improvement and invest in data informed practices that work.

The report notes the considerable activity by family and disability advocacy groups, such as Inclusion Australia, Down Syndrome Australia, and the National Alliance of Capacity Building Organisations, in providing resources to families and other stakeholders to support the section of providers who offer data-informed services with a proven history of success.

The resources the organisations have developed focus on a range of data sets that encompass both qualitive (jobs gained) and qualitative activities, such as the engagement of the family and consideration of individualised job seeking strategies. These are hosted on easily accessible websites ([Seeking-Quality-Customised-Employment-supports.pdf (ric.org.au); Everyone Can Work](); [Right To Work – A Down Syndrome Australia site)]().

Although the joint DSS and NDIS blended payment trial, which will soon begin, may explore the utilisation of outcomes as a payment determinant, the NDIA has limited proprietary data sets until the trial concludes in October 2026 (Conversation with stakeholder February and April 2024).

Developing a data framework for CE

The current lack of clarity in what CE is (and isn't), the current scarceness of data both pertaining to CE and NDIS-funded Supported Employment, the inability to draw from other jurisdictions because of their similar circumstances, and the discussion of what we should be measuring creates challenges in developing a data framework to support evidence-based employment outcomes using models of Customised Employment.

The report notes the lack of uniformly accepted data that moves beyond the anecdotal to inform service development, purchasers of service and developers of employment policy is a major impediment to CE being seen as a strategy of best practice and an issue that must be addressed with urgency.

However, the report notes the following that may create a more informed outcome.

- It has proposed a clear definition of CE which includes examples of good CE practice.

- One of the major funding sources of employment supports (DES) has developed a Quality Framework that aligns in many areas to the provision of CE.

- While limited in number, some providers have provided clear evidence of what works and how it should be recorded. This should be central to the development of data sets.

- There is recognition and interest from purchasers of services in the development of data that supports quality and outcome measures.

Deliverable three recommendations: Development of a data collection framework

The report recommends.

- That data sets are developed that link back to the Principles of CE, Elements of CE and Good CE Practice, as well as quantitative outcomes, and these are applied to each phase as have been described in this report.

- The data sets developed for each phase recognise the person-centred approach of CE, but there are explicit and overarching outcome expectations for each phase.

- The goal of the data sets is to evaluate and support services that secure outcomes of CIE that through the gaining, maintaining and enhancing of employment, which build a life for the individual that is physically, socially and economically inclusive.

- The development of data sets that support Elements of Good CE Practices identifies existing qualitive and quantitative evidence or practices aligned to CE and CIE.

- That this work is undertaken through a partnership consisting of subject matter experts drawn from.
  - participant representative bodies
  - provider peak bodies
  - centres of academic research
  - funding bodies.

- This body of work is consistent with the aims and objectives of the Disability Employment

Centre of Excellence (DSS 2023), which seeks to develop and consolidate data leading to enhanced outcomes. However, the report notes the probable lag time for this centre to become operational and so recommends NDS supports the activation of this strategy as soon as possible.

Other issues

While the report is focuses on matters emerging from the project's scope and deliverables, a number of issues were consistently raised in conversations with stakeholders.

These are noted below, and it is recommended NDS consider further investigatory work, including advocacy, in regard to them.

- The need for skilled staff to deliver CE. Stakeholders noted this training should cover:
  - values based issues aligned to the rights of all people to engage in paid inclusive employment
  - the delivery of all aspects of CE service delivery model.
- It was noted that the training should involve initial CE training that was intensive as well as ongoing mentoring to ensure skills maintenance and enhancement.
- The establishment of a national accreditation system creating Certificated CE Practitioner be evaluated and managed through the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence.
- That staff who are accredited against this system are able to be paid at a higher level and funders recognise this.
- The enhancement of the CE Community of Practice forum, where "practices that work", informed by data, can be shared. That the forum should be focussed on operational matters, primarily through the dissemination of case study information, but also have provision for discussions at a higher level on organisational structures and processes that underpin operations with a consistently high record of outcomes.
- These activities may be undertaken by the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence, but the immediacy of the need should lead NDS facilitating engagement with all providers of CE training on an interim basis.
- That outcome data is uniform in scope and transparent. It's publication to participants and other stakeholders including the wider community is seen as an example of good practice and may be part of accreditation considerations.
- The interface between NDIS and DES is a critical success element and needs to be seamless, with culture and process aligned as much as possible.

Conclusion

The report was asked to.

- Clearly define Customised Employment (CE) within the Australian Disability Employment context to provide a baseline in the sector marketplace with a mutual understanding of CE by providers, service model participants and consumers and legislative and governance entities.

- Develop a data collection framework for evidence-based employment outcomes using model/s of Customised Employment.

From a review of literature and engagement with a range of stakeholders an extensive definition of Customised Employment, which encompassed not just the what but also the how of the strategy, was developed. It drew on the work of subject matter experts in other jurisdictions.

The report struggled to address the other two objectives of the project, because of the difficulty in prescribing a time and cost for the application of a person-centred strategy, across individuals who have particular skills, circumstances, resources, and aspirations.

However, the report was able to make some interim recommendations to ensure all people with a disability who wanted Community Integrated Employment were able to work towards that goal.

The difficulty in developing data sets came from there being no clear definition of CE, there were divergent views on what should be measured, and creating an evaluating data set would be ethically problematic to implement. However, the report noted the need for data to drive enhanced outcomes for people who used the strategy to find and maintain Community Integrated employment is critical to move it beyond the definition of it being a promising practice. The report noted a number of strategies to deal with these issues.

The universality of issues outside the remit of the project was dealt with by the inclusion of a section that noted them and recommended they be looked into further.

The report highlights Customised Employment is a strategy that offers a pathway to Community Based Integrated employment for all Australians. Anecdotal evidence has shown its effectiveness to deliver outcomes regardless of the significant of the individual's impairment, where they live, what resources they have and what the economic wellbeing of their community is.

However, for Customised Employment to enhance its status as a valued and inclusive strategy, collective efforts must now work towards creating a strong evidence base to inform practice and disability employment policy. Its status will be enhanced by it being delivered by skilled practitioners.

These key outcomes will lead to increased opportunities for all Australians, including those with the most significant and complex support needs becoming valued members of their communities.
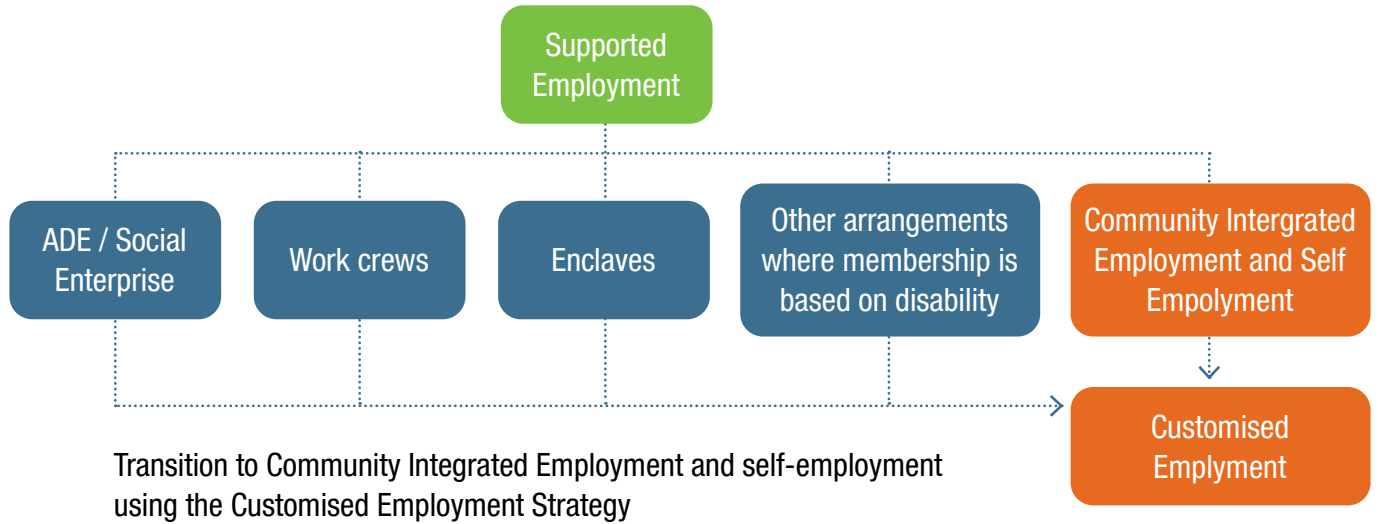
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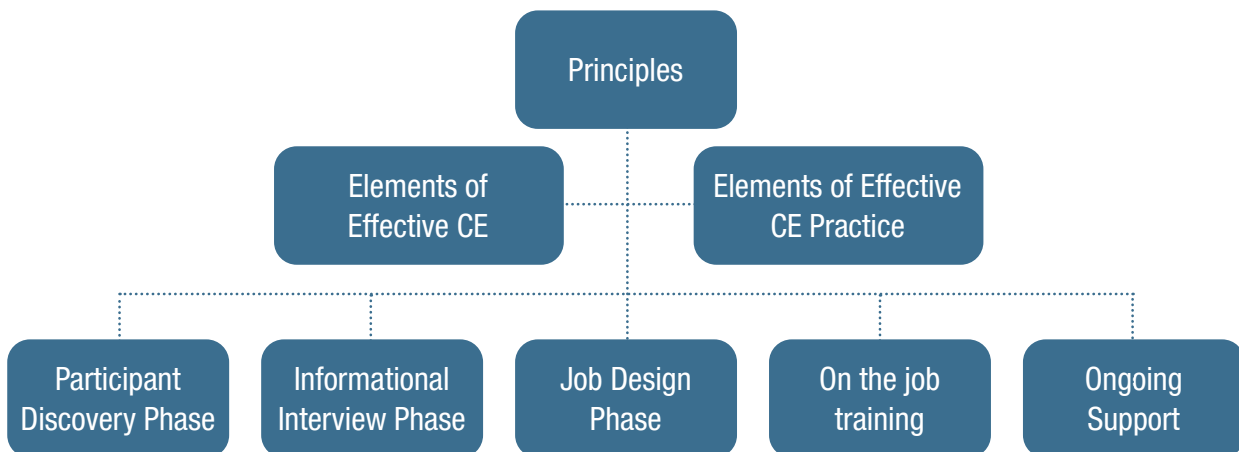
Appendices

Appendix 1: Customised Employment in the broader context of the Australian Employment Ecosystem

Supported Employment

| ADE / Social Enterprise | Work crews | Enclaves | Other arrangements where membership is based on disability | Community Intergrated Employment and Self Empolyment |

Customised Emplyment

Transition to Community Integrated Employment and self-employment using the Customised Employment Strategy

Appendix 2. The Structure of the Customised Employment Definition

Customised Employment (as Defined) is supported by.

Principles

Elements of Effective CE

Elements of Effective CE Practice

| Participant Discovery Phase | Informational Interview Phase | Job Design Phase | On the job training | Ongoing Support |

Appendix 3. Underpinning definitional context

Customised Employment serves as a person-centred strategy aimed at securing and sustaining integrated community-based employment opportunities, including self-employment. While it is applicable for all people with barriers to work, it is particularly suited to individuals with significant or complex disability. It operates on the premise of identifying and leveraging the strengths, abilities, and interests of each individual.

This approach is meticulously crafted to align job seekers' strengths, abilities and interests with potential employers' specific business needs. Through tailored strategies, both the employer and the employee receive personalised support, fostering a mutually beneficial relationship.

Service Principles

The Customised Employment strategy is underpinned by three core principles:

- inclusivity
- disability Advocacy
- individual-centred approach.

Elements of service practice

The delivery of the Customised Employment Strategy is made up from the following consistently applied elements of service practice and effective service strategies. These are often identified as the keys of Customised Employment:

- community-based employment
- voluntary and mutually beneficial relationships
- individualised job duties
- tailored employment relationships
- compliance with industrial regulations
- representation and negotiation support
- inclusive approach
- support for self-employment
- targeted support for vulnerable jobseekers.

Elements of effective Customised Employment Strategies

- community-based meetings
- rapport building.
- active listening
- direct observation
- interviews with stakeholders
- community observation
- business observations
- informational interviews
- job-related tasks
- work experience
- collaborative validation
- customised job description
- long-term support.

Phases of Customised Employment

These elements and principles are recognised and deployed in a person-centred manner through five phases:

1. Participant Discovery (Who is this person and where are they at their best)
2. Informational interviews (organisational discovery)
3. Job design and placement (Job development and negotiation)
4. Individualised job setup (Job role and task customisation)
5. On-the-job training and ongoing support (workplace integration and support)