

# Customised Employment

A Community Guide



Working Together for Meaningful Jobs



**CDERP**

Centre for Disability Employment  
Research & Practice





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# Foreword

Access to meaningful employment should not depend on luck, insider knowledge, or a person's ability to navigate systems that were never designed with them in mind.

For many people with disability and their families, employment pathways remain confusing, fragmented, and disappointing. Too often, individuals cycle through programs, assessments, and short-term experiences without ever reaching sustainable work that reflects who they are and what they can contribute. When this happens, the problem is frequently framed as individual readiness or motivation. In reality, it is more often a failure of systems, job design, and practice.

Customised Employment emerged in response to these failures. At its core, it recognises that exclusion is not inevitable and that work can be designed differently. Over time, however, Customised Employment has sometimes been reduced to a set of techniques or treated as a niche option rather than a legitimate, evidence-informed approach to employment. This has made it harder for families, participants, employers, and even practitioners to understand what good Customised Employment looks like.

This guide was created to address that gap.

It is written for the community. It is not a training manual, a funding guide, or a program brochure. Instead, it aims to provide a clear, grounded explanation of Customised Employment as it is practiced today within Australian contexts such as the NDIS and Inclusive Employment Australia. It describes the intent, the process, and the conditions that support quality outcomes, while also naming the risks that arise when practice drifts or becomes rushed.

The guide reflects more than two decades of Australian practice development, research, and workforce training led through the **Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP)** and related initiatives. This work has focused on adapting Customised Employment to real-world systems, strengthening practitioner capability, integrating employment counselling and Discovery, and ensuring that employment pathways remain ethical, sustainable, and person-centred.

By making this guide available to the community, our hope is to support informed choice, shared understanding, and higher expectations of quality across the employment landscape. Meaningful employment is not simply an outcome to be measured. It is a relationship that must be built with care, intention, and respect. When work fits, people thrive, businesses benefit, and communities are stronger.

This guide is an invitation to think differently about how employment can be created, not just found.

**Dr Peter Smith**

Director

Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP)

## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to be used flexibly. You do not need to read it from beginning to end, and different sections will be useful at different times.

### For People with Disability

Use this guide to:

- understand what Customised Employment actually involves
- recognise what good support should look like
- reflect on how you work best and what matters to you in employment
- ask informed questions of services and practitioners

You may find the sections on Discovery, customised roles, and support especially helpful.

### For Families and Supporters

Use this guide to:

- build a shared understanding of employment pathways
- recognise quality practice and avoid common pitfalls
- support informed decision-making without speaking over the person
- understand how systems like the NDIS and IEA shape employment supports

The examples throughout the guide can help you recognise how Customised Employment works in real situations.

### For Practitioners and Service Providers

Use this guide to:

- reflect on practice quality and intent
- explain Customised Employment clearly to participants and families
- support consistent language across teams
- identify where practice may be drifting from its original purpose

This guide is not a substitute for training, but it can support shared expectations and ethical practice.

### For Employers

Use this guide to:

- understand how customised roles are created
- explore alternative ways of designing work

- see how inclusive employment can benefit business operations
- engage in conversations about contribution rather than labels

You do not need prior knowledge of disability employment to use this guide.

## **A Final Note**

This guide is intended to support informed choice, shared understanding, and quality practice.

Customised Employment works best when everyone involved understands the process, the purpose, and their role within it. We encourage readers to return to different sections as their employment journey evolves.

## **About This Guide**

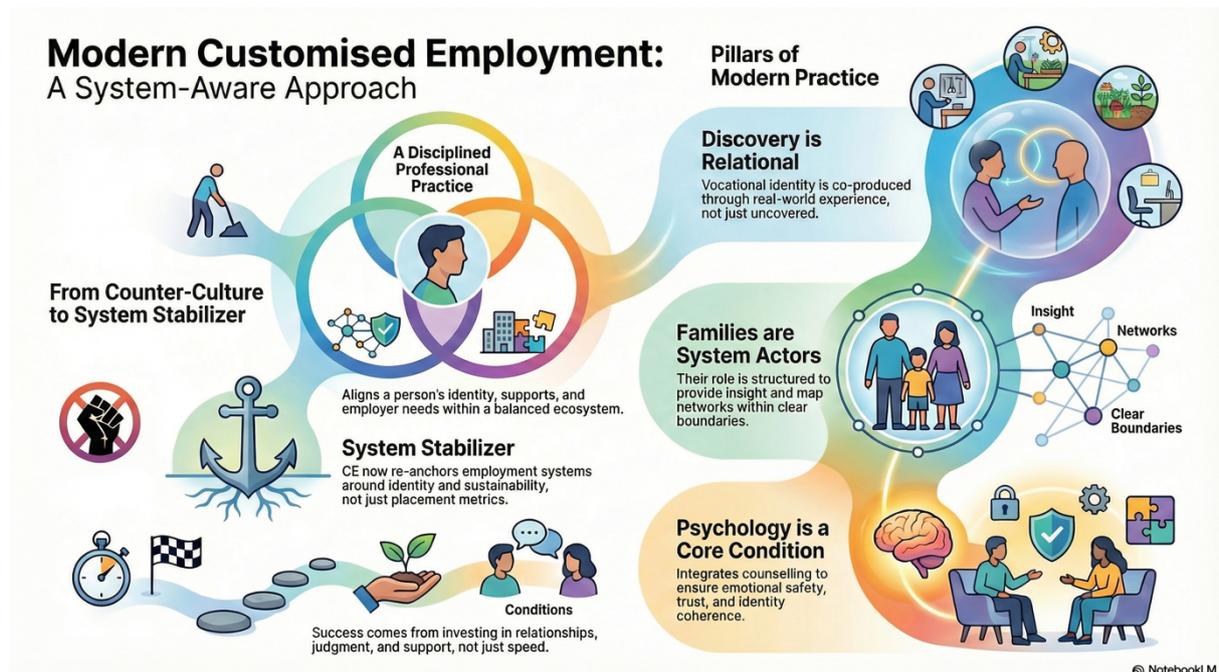
This guide is offered freely to the community to explain Customised Employment in a clear, practical, and contemporary way.

It is written for:

- people with disability exploring employment
- families and supporters
- community organisations and advocates
- employers curious about inclusive hiring
- practitioners and service leaders seeking clarity

This guide reflects contemporary Australian practice within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA). It is not a program description and not tied to a single provider. Instead, it describes what quality Customised Employment looks like when done well.

# What Is Customised Employment?



Customised Employment is a way of finding and creating work that starts with the person, not a job ad. Instead of asking people to compete for roles that were designed without them in mind, it looks at what someone can genuinely contribute and how work can be shaped around that contribution.

This approach begins by taking time to understand the person in their everyday life, including their interests, strengths, and the conditions they need to do their best work. At the same time, it involves learning how businesses actually operate, what work needs to be done, and where there are gaps or pressures in day-to-day tasks. From there, roles are worked out through conversation and agreement, so they make sense for both the worker and the employer.

Customised Employment is based on a simple idea: many people are excluded from work not because they lack ability, but because jobs are designed in narrow ways. When work is designed more thoughtfully, more people can take part and succeed.

## Why Traditional Pathways Often Fail

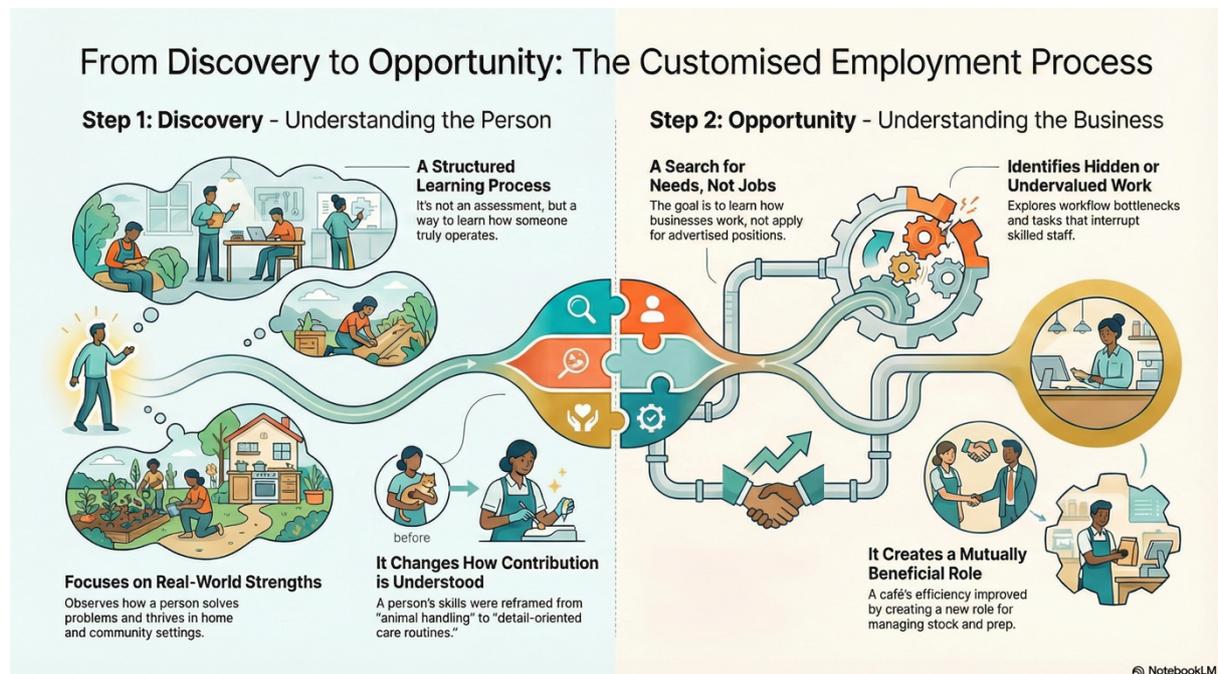
Traditional employment pathways are built around resumes, interviews, competitive selection processes, and rigid job descriptions. These methods assume that people can quickly describe their skills on paper, perform well under pressure in unfamiliar settings, and fit neatly into roles that have already been defined. For many people with disability, this is not how capability is best shown.

In practice, these processes often reward speed, confidence, and performance in artificial situations rather than genuine contribution in real work. They can obscure

strengths that only emerge over time, in context, and through doing. As a result, people who could be effective, reliable workers are screened out before they ever have the chance to demonstrate how they actually work.

Customised Employment exists because these systems were not designed for cognitive, sensory, or relational diversity. Rather than asking people to adapt to narrow recruitment norms, Customised Employment starts from the premise that work itself can be designed differently, in ways that allow a wider range of people to contribute meaningfully and sustainably.

## Discovery: Understanding a Person at Work



Discovery is the starting point of Customised Employment. It is not a test, an assessment, or a way of deciding whether someone is “ready” for work. Instead, it is a structured way of learning about how a person actually functions when they are engaged in meaningful activity.

Through Discovery, attention is paid to what naturally holds a person’s interest, how they approach tasks, how they solve problems, and the environments in which they do their best work. It also looks at the situations that make things harder for them, so these can be understood and planned for rather than treated as personal failings.

Discovery does not happen in artificial settings. It takes place across real parts of a person’s life, such as at home, in the community, in education or training settings, through volunteering, or during informal work-like activities. This helps build a more accurate picture of how someone works over time and in context.

For example, a young man who said he wanted to “work with animals” had repeatedly been guided toward hands-on kennel work. During Discovery, it became clear that his

real strengths were not in physically handling animals, but in working with routines, paying close attention to detail, and persisting quietly with tasks over long periods. He showed particular skill in tracking feeding schedules and maintaining cleaning processes. As a result, the employment focus shifted away from animal handling and toward roles that involved care routines and operations, opening up a wider range of workplaces and more suitable job options.

Discovery did not change who he was.  
It changed how his contribution was understood.

## **From Discovery to Opportunity**

Once Discovery is complete, the focus shifts from learning about the person to learning about the world of work. This stage is about understanding how businesses actually operate day to day, rather than searching job ads or applying for advertised roles.

Instead of asking, “What jobs are available?”, practitioners and participants spend time observing and talking with employers to learn how workflows through a business. They look closely at how tasks are organised, which jobs require the most skill and attention, and where work tends to pile up or get overlooked. Often, there is important work happening in the background that does not appear in any job description but still needs to be done for the business to run smoothly.

These conversations explore things like workflow patterns, task sequences, and the small but essential jobs that interrupt skilled staff or slow down operations. They also pay attention to bottlenecks, inefficiencies, and tasks that are shared informally or handled inconsistently across shifts. Understanding this helps reveal opportunities that are not visible through standard recruitment processes.

Importantly, these discussions are not job interviews, and they are not sales pitches. They are learning conversations, guided by curiosity rather than persuasion. The aim is to understand the business well enough to see where a person’s strengths and ways of working could genuinely add value.

For example, during conversations with a local café, it became clear that senior staff were regularly pulled away from customer service to manage stock rotation, food preparation, and cleaning routines during busy periods. These tasks were essential to the café’s operation, but they were spread across different staff and often done in a rushed or inconsistent way. By understanding how this work fitted into the overall workflow, it became possible to see an opportunity for a dedicated back-of-house role. This improved efficiency for the café while also creating a sustainable job that matched a person’s strengths in routine, organisation, and order.

This stage turns insight into opportunity. By taking the time to understand how businesses really work, Customised Employment makes it possible to create roles that benefit both the employer and the worker, rather than trying to force a fit where one does not exist.

## Creating Customised Roles

Customised roles are not made up or offered as a favour. They are carefully negotiated roles that grow out of a clear understanding of both the person and the business. The aim is to bring together what a person can contribute, what the business genuinely needs, and what will work sustainably over time.

Rather than trying to squeeze someone into an existing job description, this approach looks at how work is already being done and how it could be organised differently. In many workplaces, tasks are spread across multiple roles, handled inconsistently, or added on to already busy staff. Customisation involves reshaping this work, so it makes sense for everyone involved.

This might mean grouping together a set of related tasks into one role, changing how work is allocated across a team, adjusting the timing or order in which tasks are completed, or redesigning how supervision and feedback are provided. These changes are usually small, but they can make a significant difference to both productivity and job satisfaction.

For example, in a small logistics business, warehouse staff were regularly interrupted during skilled picking work to complete repetitive packing and labelling tasks. These interruptions slowed down operations and increased errors. By carving out the packing and labelling tasks into a separate role, the business improved overall throughput and reduced disruption. At the same time, it created a position that suited a worker who preferred structured, repetitive tasks and minimal interruption.

This was not charity or special treatment.  
It was simply good job design that worked better for everyone.

## Work Trials and Employment Experiences

Work trials and paid employment experiences are often used in Customised Employment to help test whether a role is a good fit. When they are designed well, they are not about putting someone on trial or asking them to prove their worth. Instead, they are opportunities for everyone involved to learn.

Good trials are purposeful and clearly planned. They have a specific reason for taking place, run for a set period of time, and include regular feedback and reflection. What is learned during the trial is then used to improve job design, adjust supports, or clarify expectations, rather than being treated as a pass-or-fail exercise.

These experiences allow the person to understand what the work feels like in practice and give the employer a chance to see real contribution in a real setting. They also create space to notice what works well and what needs to change for the role to be sustainable.

For example, a trial in a local council depot initially highlighted sensory challenges related to noise levels and the timing of certain tasks. Rather than ending the opportunity, the trial was used as a learning process. Shift times were adjusted and tasks were reordered to reduce sensory overload. These relatively small changes made a significant difference and led to ongoing employment that had previously seemed unlikely.

Poorly designed trials, on the other hand, can do more harm than good. Trials that drift without clear purpose or decisions can undermine confidence, create uncertainty, and delay real employment outcomes. In Customised Employment, trials are most effective when they are used with intention and followed by action.

## **Support That Builds Independence**

Support in Customised Employment is provided with clear intention. Its purpose is not simply to help someone get through each day at work, but to support learning, confidence, and independence over time.

This kind of support happens in real workplaces, where skills are developed in context rather than in training rooms or simulations. It focuses on helping people build competence, understand routines, and develop their own ways of completing tasks successfully. As confidence grows, support is gradually adjusted so the person can take more ownership of their role.

Importantly, support is not meant to stay the same forever. While some people may need ongoing assistance, the type and intensity of support should continue to change as the person learns and becomes more established in their role. The goal is always to reduce reliance where possible, not to create dependence.

Within the **NDIS**, effective employment support aligns with capacity building and skill development. It is most successful when it helps people strengthen their abilities and confidence, rather than positioning support as something that must remain constant in order for work to continue.

## **The Role of the Practitioner**

In Customised Employment, practitioners are not recruiters or placement officers whose job is to fill vacancies as quickly as possible. Their role is broader and more relational. They work alongside the person, their family where appropriate, and employers to help build employment pathways that are realistic, ethical, and sustainable.

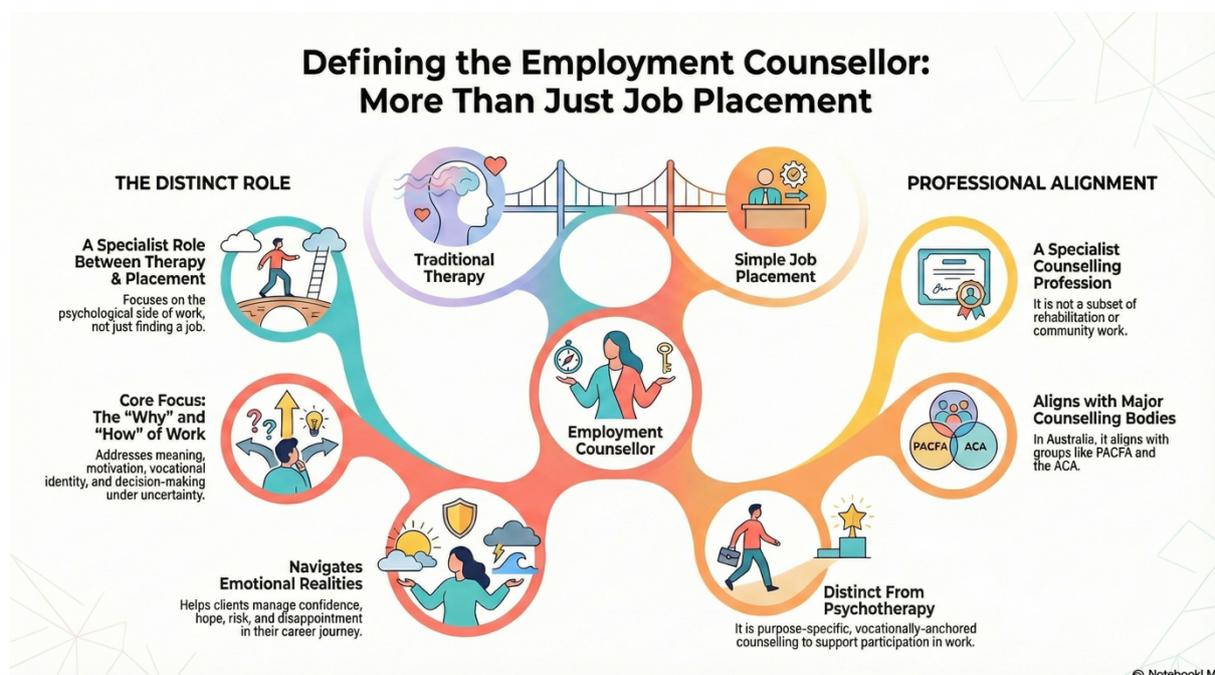
Practitioners act first as listeners. They take time to understand the person's experiences, goals, concerns, and ways of working. They also listen carefully to families and supporters, while ensuring that the person's own voice and choices remain central. This listening role continues throughout the employment journey, not just at the beginning.

They also act as translators between people and workplaces. Many people with disability and many employers speak different “languages” about work. Practitioners help translate strengths, needs, and working styles into terms that make sense to businesses, and they help interpret workplace expectations, culture, and feedback in ways the person can understand and respond to.

A key part of the practitioner’s role is negotiating job design. This includes working with employers to shape roles, tasks, schedules, and supervision in ways that align with business needs while supporting the person to succeed. These negotiations are collaborative and respectful, and they focus on creating arrangements that work in practice, not just on paper.

Practitioners are also supporters of learning and adaptation. They help people learn their role in real workplaces, adjust supports as confidence grows, and respond constructively when challenges arise. Rather than stepping in to “fix” problems, they focus on problem-solving, reflection, and gradual change.

Quality Customised Employment practice requires training, ongoing reflection, and clear ethical boundaries. Practitioners must understand how systems such as the **NDIS** and **Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA)** shape what is possible, and how to work within these systems without losing sight of the person’s goals and wellbeing. Families and participants should be able to expect that practitioners are skilled, accountable, and committed to building employment pathways that last.



# What Happens Behind the Scenes in Customised Employment

Not all the work in Customised Employment happens in meetings or produces a formal report. A significant part of effective employment support happens behind the scenes, and it is essential to achieving safe, sustainable, and well-matched jobs.

Behind-the-scenes time is not administrative or paperwork time. It is professional employment development and counselling work.

Our counsellors use this time to:

- **Research industries, roles, and workplaces** that align with a person's strengths, interests, sensory needs, and conditions for success
- **Identify and contact employers**, including making exploratory calls and arranging workplace visits
- **Visit workplaces** to understand job design, workflow, culture, supervision styles, and sensory or environmental demands
- **Plan individualised employment strategies**, including pacing, approach, and risk management tailored to each person
- **Consult internally** with other practitioners to test ideas, reflect on fit, and refine strategy
- **Prepare for employer conversations** so discussions are respectful, targeted, and focused on real business needs rather than generic job seeking

This work ensures that when we do engage directly with an employer or support a participant into a role, the approach is informed, intentional, and aligned with the person's goals and wellbeing.

## Why This Time Matters

Customised Employment is not about sending résumés, applying for advertised jobs, or matching people to vacancies. It is about **designing the right job in the right context**, which requires careful preparation.

Investing time behind the scenes helps to:

- Reduce the risk of poor job matches and early job breakdown
- Avoid unnecessary work trials or placements that are not viable
- Support employer confidence and long-term engagement
- Protect participants from repeated failure or burnout
- Increase the likelihood of sustainable employment outcomes

In many cases, this preparation is what makes the difference between a short-term placement and a job that lasts.

## How This Fits with NDIS Funding

Under the NDIS, capacity-building supports are intended to fund the *work required to achieve outcomes*, not just visible deliverables. Behind-the-scenes employment development is a legitimate and necessary part of supporting a participant to build employment capacity and access work that is right for them.

While this work may not always result in a formal written report, it is purposeful, accountable, and directly linked to the participant's employment goals.

### In Short

If we only worked when a participant was in the room, or only charged when a report was produced, we would be delivering a generic service. Customised Employment works because we invest the time to think, plan, research, and engage carefully on behalf of each individual.

That work may be behind the scenes, but it is where much of the real employment support happens.

## Customised Employment in NDIS and IEA Contexts

Customised Employment fits within Australian employment systems when it is delivered with care, skill, and fidelity to its core principles. It is not a separate or alternative system, but a way of working that can sit comfortably within existing funding and program structures when the focus remains on quality practice.

Within the **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)**, Customised Employment aligns closely with capacity building approaches to employment. It supports people to build skills, confidence, and experience through supports such as Employment Assistance, Finding and Keeping a Job, and School to Work transitions. When used well, these supports allow time for Discovery, job design, learning in real workplaces, and gradual reduction of support as independence grows.

Within **Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA)**, Customised Employment aligns with expectations around individualised service delivery and meaningful employer engagement. Rather than focusing only on filling advertised vacancies, this approach encourages deeper engagement with employers to understand how work is organised and how roles can be designed to support sustainable employment outcomes.

Across both systems, the success of Customised Employment does not depend on what it is called or how it is branded. Outcomes depend on how the work is done. High-quality practice, skilled practitioners, and enough time to do the work properly matter far more than labels. When delivered with integrity, Customised Employment can support meaningful, lasting employment within both NDIS and IEA contexts.

## Recognising Quality Customised Employment

Quality Customised Employment is reflected in how the work is done, not just in whether someone gets a job. Good practice is usually visible when people know what to look for, and it shows up consistently across the experience of the person, their family, and the employer.

High-quality practice begins with clear Discovery. There is evidence that time has been spent observing and learning about the person in real-life situations, rather than relying on assumptions, labels, or paperwork alone. Employment pathways are built from what is seen and understood, not from generic ideas about what someone “should” be able to do.

Families often notice this quality early. They see whether practitioners take the time to listen, whether they respect the person’s voice, and whether family insight is welcomed without taking over decision-making. In strong practice, families are treated as partners in understanding history, context, and support needs, while the person remains at the centre of all employment decisions.

Quality Customised Employment also involves respectful and genuine engagement with employers. Conversations are focused on learning how the business operates and identifying where contribution makes sense, rather than pushing people into available roles. The jobs that emerge fit naturally into the workplace and make operational sense, benefiting both the employer and the worker.

Support is another clear indicator of quality. In good practice, support changes over time. As people gain skills and confidence, support is adjusted and often reduced. Families can usually see this progression, with growing independence rather than increasing reliance. Employment that is well designed and well supported is more likely to last and feel sustainable for everyone involved.

High-quality providers are also open to reflection and accountability. Many strong Customised Employment services work within recognised quality and fidelity frameworks, such as the **Customised Employment Quality Assurance Framework (CEQAF)**. These frameworks support services to review how closely their practice aligns with the core principles of Customised Employment, including Discovery, job design, employer engagement, and support that builds independence. For families and participants, this signals a commitment to transparency, learning, and continuous improvement.

There are also warning signs that practice may be drifting. These include rushing to resumes and job applications without clear Discovery, repeated unpaid work experiences that do not lead to paid employment, generic job development approaches that ignore individual strengths, and support arrangements that never change or fade. Families often sense when this is happening, particularly when progress stalls or when employment feels fragile rather than stable.

Recognising these signs helps people with disability and their families ask better questions, make informed choices, and seek employment support that is more likely to lead to meaningful and lasting work.

## **Questions for Families to Ask Employment Providers**

Families play an important role in supporting informed employment choices. Asking the right questions can help clarify whether a service is offering quality Customised Employment or simply using the language without the practice behind it.

These questions are not about catching providers out. They are about understanding how a service works and whether it is likely to meet the needs of the person you support.

### **About Discovery**

- How do you get to know the person before looking for work?
- What does Discovery involve in practice, and how long does it usually take?
- Where does Discovery happen? Is it based on real-life settings or mainly on assessments and forms?
- How do you include family knowledge while keeping the person's voice central?

### **About Job Development and Employers**

- How do you approach employers if there is no advertised job?
- How do you learn about how a business actually operates?
- Can you give examples of roles you have helped customise rather than simply fill?
- How do you make sure the job makes sense for the employer as well as the person?

### **About Work Trials and Experiences**

- When do you use work trials or employment experiences?
- How do you make sure these experiences lead somewhere, rather than repeating without progress?
- How are decisions made at the end of a trial?
- Are work trials paid, and if not, why?

### **About Support on the Job**

- What does support look like once someone starts work?
- How do you help the person learn their role in the actual workplace?
- How does support change over time as confidence and skills grow?
- What is the plan for reducing or adjusting support where possible?

## About Quality and Accountability

- How do you check that your practice is working well?
- Do you use any quality or fidelity frameworks to guide your work, such as CEQAF?
- How do you use feedback from participants and families to improve your service?
- What happens if progress stalls or a job does not work out?

## A Final Tip for Families

Quality Customised Employment takes time and thoughtful work. Families often sense when a service is genuinely learning, adapting, and building relationships, rather than rushing to meet targets. Trust those instincts, ask questions, and remember that good providers welcome curiosity and conversation.

## Acknowledgement of Practice and Development

This guide reflects more than two decades of practice development, research, and workforce training in Customised Employment in Australia.

It draws on the work of the **Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP)** and its affiliated training arm, CDERP College, which has contributed to:

- adapting Customised Employment to Australian systems
- integrating Discovery with contemporary employment counselling
- aligning practice with NDIS and IEA policy environments
- developing practitioner capability through accredited training

This work has focused on ensuring Customised Employment remains:

- evidence-informed
- ethically grounded
- system-aware
- responsive to real-world complexity

While this guide is free and community-focused, it reflects an ongoing commitment to practice quality, workforce capability, and employment outcomes that endure.

## A Shared Responsibility

Customised Employment works best when:

- people with disability are informed and supported
- families understand the process

- practitioners are skilled and reflective
- employers are engaged as partners
- systems allow time for quality work

Employment is not just an outcome.  
It is a relationship.

Customised Employment is about restoring that relationship so people can contribute, belong, and thrive.





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