



# Job Customization and its Benefits

## Introduction

The current job market is extremely competitive, causing significant challenges for both employers and employees. For some employers, it is particularly difficult to deal with the lack of available workforce. Some companies face significant challenges, such as low level of productivity and high costs related to turnover and overtime. Moreover, employers often have difficulty to fully harness the potential of their employees.

For employees, one of the major problems is to find and keep a job that matches their expectations, training and skills. For a particular group, the challenge is even more complex. Persons with a disability face many barriers making their job search particularly challenging. Although many have jobs, many persons with a disability are often struggling to find work. In some instances, or with some disabilities, the person with a disability is unable to fulfill all the requirements of an existing position, but is still able to contribute to the workforce. There is an interesting option for employers and persons with a disability who have a hard time getting and retaining traditional employment of available positions: job customization.

This increasingly popular practice allows employers to find new ways to be competitive and productive. Although job customization is an external solution to the traditional hiring process, it is undeniable that it is an interesting strategy when one understands what it is and what benefits result from it.

It is important not to confuse providing accommodations to an employee with a disability in order for them to fulfil the job position versus job customization which actually creates a position based on the employee's abilities and needs of the employer.

### 1. What is job customization?

Job customization is a practice that builds a position on the strengths and abilities of an employee. In other words, we individualize an employment relationship between a job seeker and an employer so the goals and needs of each are addressed. The employee is hired and paid directly by the employer (although the hiring and interview process may be based on a negotiated arrangement facilitated by an employment specialist)<sup>1</sup>. The individual has tasks that differs from the employer's standard job description.

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<sup>1</sup> Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire. *Personnalisation du travail : Création de possibilités d'emploi pour les personnes ayant un handicap dans la main-d'œuvre d'aujourd'hui*, [Online], <http://readywillingable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/NBACL-Work-Customization-Formatted->



Job customization allows the objectives of both parties to be met. It gives persons with a disability the opportunity to have a job and contribute to the success of an organisation, while allowing the employer to improve the efficiency and productivity of the business. Job customization is not a favor made to the individual. Rather, the individual makes a concrete contribution so job customization is valuable and profitable. The employee must perform essential tasks for the proper functioning of the business.

Job customization may vary, but in general, there is a negotiation between the employer and the individual with a disability. This arrangement may include working hours, location, functions, responsibilities and expectations. Also, the two parties must make a clear and accurate description of what is expected from the employee-employer relationship. There are several ways to customize a job and the following three practices are particularly popular and interesting.

The first way to customize a job is simply to create a new position for the person with a disability. A second technique is to perform a redistribution of tasks within the company by removing an employee's tasks and transferring them to the person with a disability. The third practice is to modify an existing position so it meets the needs of the individual with a disability<sup>2</sup>. In general, job customization is a term used when a person holds a position that does not fit the standard job description. In summary, there are many ways to customize a position. An employer needs to be creative, open and aware of the benefits resulting from this practice.

It is also necessary to know for whom job customization is feasible and beneficial. In general, it is used for persons with a disability, especially those with severe disabilities<sup>3</sup>. Job customization is often applicable to individuals constantly struggling to find employment in a competitive market, and those whose abilities are not recognized in traditional employment settings. Job customization allows to provide a restricted individual to work within a company while contributing to its success.

Another important aspect is to know when it is appropriate to consider customizing a job. In fact, there are several ways to know if a company can benefit from this practice. Here is a list of potential questions indicating whether the process will be beneficial or not:

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French1.pdf (Page consulted June 26th, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Labor. *What Is Customized Employment?*, [Online], <http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/> (Page consulted June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Community Inclusion. (2004). *When Existing Jobs Don't Fit: A Guide to Job Creation*, Institute Brief 17, University of Massachusetts Boston, [Online], [http://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article\\_id=126](http://www.communityinclusion.org/article.php?article_id=126) (Page consulted July 3rd, 2014)

- Does your business or your employees need help? Which sectors and/or tasks could benefit from help?
- Are there tasks that are not completed?
- Do your employees perform duties that are outside their areas of expertise?
- Would it be possible to remove some responsibilities from employees by reassigning them to another so everybody can focus on their essential tasks?
- Do you have to pay overtime to employees so they can perform their duties?
- Are there times when your business is busier and during which it would be beneficial to get extra help?
- Could your organization establish a new service or a new position to increase productivity and improve employees' and customers' satisfaction?
- Are your employees complaining about tasks they believe non-essential or out of their responsibilities? <sup>4</sup>

Before implementing job customization, it is essential to know whether the culture and atmosphere of the company are favourable to accommodate this practice as well as an individual with a disability in its workplace<sup>5</sup>. It is therefore necessary for the other employees to be trained and aware about the integration of a person with a disability, as well as the job customization, in their workplace.

## 2. The job customization process

When a company starts the job customization process, several steps need to be followed to make sure it is properly established and profitable.

The first step is to meet the individual with a disability (or employment services agency). This step is mainly for the employer and the person to get to know each other. The employer has the opportunity to learn about the individual by getting information on his or her capabilities, background, training and expectations. The individual better understands what is the culture of the company and the expectations of the employer towards the job customization that applies to this particular case<sup>6</sup>.

The second phase is the development of a job description, which is negotiated and established between the two parties. It is very important for this description to be as clear and precise as possible so the employer and the employee are aware of what is expected in terms of duties and responsibilities<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire. *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Community Inclusion. *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult. (2005). *Customized Employment: Practical Solutions for Employment Success*, Cornell University ILR School, [Online], <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1351&context=gladnetcollect> (Page consulted July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Community Inclusion. *op.cit.*



The third step is to negotiate the terms of employment. This phase, like the previous one, involves a collaboration between the two parties. Here, we add information on different job duties, hours of work and location. Moreover, we provide specifications on the orientation period and the hiring process<sup>8</sup>.

The final step of the job customization is the support of the employee after being hired. This phase is simply to give proper guidance and supervision to make sure the individual easily integrates in the workplace. It is always possible to get help from different agencies or departments to ensure the person is comfortable in the company, and thus to benefit the most from this process<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Benefits of job customization

At first, job customization seems to primarily benefit the individuals with a disability, and not the employer. It is true that job customization bases the job on the person, but it is important not to forget that it is the result of a collaboration between the employer and the employee. Also, the individual must make a real contribution to the company for the job customization to be a success.

It is undeniable that this practice offers many benefits for individuals with a disability, such as integrating into the job market and getting a job in a very competitive world. Moreover, job customization allows them to use their strengths and capabilities, while respecting their limits. For a person who is struggling to find a job within traditional hiring practices and do not meet the objectives of usual job descriptions, this process is a profitable solution.

There are also many benefits for employers to support job customization. In fact, it allows employers to adjust to the reality of the labour market by offering a solution to issues such as the lack of manpower and high turnover rates<sup>10</sup>. In actuality, this practice may increase the productivity and efficiency of a company. For example, one can transfer non-core tasks of certain employees to the person with a disability. Thus, workers perform the essential duties of their positions and can be more productive<sup>11</sup>. Job customization may also reduce the amount of overtime paid to employees<sup>12</sup>. Another obvious advantage of this process consists in the satisfaction of other workers — because they can now do their work according to their level of expertise—as well as the customers' satisfaction due to the improved customer service that follows.<sup>13</sup> Job customization is an inclusive

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<sup>8</sup> National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult. *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire. *op.cit.* p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Institute for Community Inclusion. *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



practice demonstrating an organization's openness to diversity and change<sup>14</sup>. As can be seen, job customization has many advantages both for the person with a disability and the employer and that the two parties involved can be in a "win-win" situation<sup>15</sup>.

#### **4. Examples of job customization**

For some employers, job customization seems a little vague and impossible to implement within their type of business. However, it can be beneficial in various businesses. Therefore, it is appropriate to mention some examples of job customization to concretely demonstrate the many possibilities of this practice, regardless of the nature of the organization.

For example, in a retail store or a big box store, a company can lose considerable amounts of money in sales and product loss. For instance, one can hire a person with a disability to fill shelves, place products in the right order and label merchandise. This individual may also be in charge of the decoration, product assembly and various warehouse tasks. Another possible option is to have the individual at the entrance or exit of the store to ensure customers are well received and have quality customer service.

In the administrative field, a person with a disability can do the data entry, photocopying and ensure that equipment is kept in order. In terms of construction or factories, an individual can handle data entry, as well as being responsible for providing and collecting tools for other employees or be useful in other capacities depending on the needs of the employer.

More so, persons with a disability can perform essential functions in many areas; therefore, they may hold tasks in maintenance or inventory or other areas. It is also possible for a company to allow the individual to perform tasks that were not previously performed, but are essential to the proper functioning of the organization. Job customization also helps to provide better services to customers, and thereby, increase their satisfaction.

The following is a concrete example that demonstrates the benefits associated with job customization for both the employer and employee. An employer manages a manufacturing plant and discovers, after analyzing the many positions, that for the last thirty minutes of their shift every employee stops his/her tasks to clean up their station and to store the equipment. If we estimate the average hourly wage of each employee to be between 15 and 20 dollars, for a company that holds twenty employees, this leads to

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<sup>14</sup> Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire. *op.cit.* p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> United States Department of Labor. *op.cit.*



significant losses. These employees spend two and a half hours per week on tasks outside their area of expertise, while they could be performing the essential ones. In this example, it is very beneficial to hire a person with a disability to clean workstations and store equipment...even if it is only a few hours a week. In this way, skilled workers can perform their essential duties for their entire shift, which allows employers to significantly increase the productivity of the business and the effectiveness of employees.

One of the most famous stories of job customization is Mark Wafer's, owner of several Tim Hortons in Toronto and promoter of diversity in the workplace. In his various branches, Mr. Wafer is hiring many persons with a disability on different levels of the organization. He uses this process to provide opportunities for persons with a disability to have jobs at any level ... in positions ranging from maintenance to management<sup>16</sup>. The following link shows an interview with Mark Wafer. The video provides information about his story and the benefits related to including persons with a disability with the assistance of job customization: <http://tvo.org/video/202356/mark-wafer-enabling-disabled>.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

The primary goal of job customization is not to do a favor for a person with a disability. Rather, it gives them the opportunity to take a position with key responsibilities related to the well-functioning of an organization, while improving its productivity and efficiency. For this process to be possible, managers need to analyze the various positions and identify where help is essential; thus, they will be perfectly aware of what tasks to assign to the individual.

Job customization has many benefits for the person with a disability and for the employer. Moreover, there is no doubt that with the implementation thereof, the two parties win. One of the keys to success in the process is to know the company and its positions, while remaining open and creative. For employers, it is pertinent to take the time to consider questions such as: is job customization applicable in my business and how can we use this technique to improve the productivity and effectiveness of employees?

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<sup>16</sup> Gouvernement du Canada, Ressources Humaines et développement des compétences. (2013). *Repenser l'incapacité dans le secteur privé: nous avons tous des capacités, certaines sont seulement plus apparentes que d'autres : rapport du Groupe de travail spécial sur les possibilités d'emploi des personnes handicapées*, [Online], [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/liste\\_hebdomadaire/2013/electronique/w13-05-U-F.html/collections/collection\\_2013/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS64-21-2013-fra.pdf](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/201/301/liste_hebdomadaire/2013/electronique/w13-05-U-F.html/collections/collection_2013/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS64-21-2013-fra.pdf) (Page consulted May 28th, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> The Ontario Educational Communications Authority (TVO). (April 2014). *The Agenda with Steve Paikin: Mark Wafer: Enabling the Disabled*, [Online], <http://tvo.org/video/202356/mark-wafer-enabling-disabled> (Page consulted July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014)



For further information, please contact the New Brunswick Employer Support Services (NBESS). The NBESS offers free services to employers through consultations, presentations and training.

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