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Abstract

While a number of trends can be seen that vocational evaluation services are more in need than ever, there are at the same time disturbing events pointing to the decline of vocational evaluation as a distinct discipline. Those trends are examined in this paper which was presented at the Third National Forum on Issues in Vocational Assessment in Clearwater, Florida in September 1987. The participants at that meeting were divided into six groups to discuss a) issues responsible for current trends in vocational evaluation, b) additional comments from participants, and c) suggestions as to what the field should do to address the trends. A summary of those group's reports is presented.

Those having longevity of work experience in vocational evaluation can point with pride to their accomplishments in assisting the field to grow and prosper as it has taken on the trappings of a professionalizing discipline. Thus it has gained a definable territory, several professional organizations, a certifying process, university education as a prerequisite to entry, and a developing body of knowledge. In addition, indicators point to an ever expanding need for the service of vocational evaluation for a variety of populations. For example, the legal profession has discovered what the Social Security Administration has known for a long time. That is, there is a monetary benefit of using the expertise of vocational experts for workman's compensation, personal injury, and alimony litigation. Many of these experts perform a vocational evaluation and the result of that process becomes their expert testimony. Other settings are recognizing the need for this field and are expanding their services to include it. For example, personnel departments in industry have begun incorporated vocational evaluation because the test procedures meet Equal Employment Opportunity Commission guidelines and because it works in screening in the most qualified. Baum (1987) pointed out the rapid expansion of Rehabilitation Hospitals as being the biggest news in the health care industry's expansion. Many of those consider work evaluation and work hardening to be as integral a component as physical therapy.

Vocational evaluation was well on the way to becoming established in the school setting in special education and vocational education when the Carl Perkins Act was passed mandating the service for vocational education special needs children and further strengthened the need for the service as a part of public education. Other examples can be found where vocational evaluation has become a valued part of systems such as in corrections, the Veteran's Administration, welfare, JPTA programs, and colleges/universities.

The need for vocational evaluation can be recognized by the number of other disciplines who have suddenly found that they want to carry out this function. Therefore, those claiming expertise in vocational evaluation other than vocational evaluators are individuals from occupational therapy, rehabilitation counseling, school psychology, special education, vocational education, and career development.

Lastly, there are indicators that vocational programs for the disabled are not working effectively and need greater attention by more and better trained vocational rehabilitation personnel including vocational

evaluators to improve the lives of disabled Americans through allowing them entry into the mainstream of American life through work. This is well illustrated in a recent Harris Poll (NARF, 1987) on which two thirds of the disabled mainstream of American life through work. This is well illustrated in a recent Harris Poll (NARF, 1987) on which two thirds of the disabled individuals between the ages of 16 and 64 reported they are not working and 66% of those reported they want to work. Other such statistics from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation demonstrate that the bulk of special education graduates do not find jobs as unemployment has become the expected future of the disabled.

As stated, those in the discipline of vocational evaluation can take pride in the growth, development, apparent need, and acceptance of their work. Unfortunately, there are some disturbing recent trends which counteract those positive indicators and suggest that vocational evaluation, in its present form and function, may be a dying discipline and one which is moving more toward being deprofessionalized. In the first of these indicators, the move from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation to greatly expand the emphasis in Supported Employment has brought with it a deemphasis of assessment as being a service which not only screens out disabled people but is not needed in placing individuals in supported employment. For instance, in a telling move, the proposed funding priorities for fiscal 1988 for the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (Federal Register, 1987) lists twelve funding priorities for that agency. The first is entitled "New Directions for Rehabilitation Facilities" (p. 37574). In that section, it is stated that "Rehabilitation services are rapidly shifting from providing evaluation and training in facilities toward providing these services in regular integrated job sites" (p. 37575). It goes on to encourage the submission of research studies to help redirect these facilities and their workers. While easy to dismiss as being written by someone out of touch with the field, other indicators point to a decline in the number of personnel available or requested.

The recent report by Menz (1987) on a rehabilitation facility manpower study showed a 15 to 20 percent decline in vocational people (evaluation and adjustment) in rehabilitation centers. This matches a trend seen at Auburn where job requests for graduates has been falling off by 50% per year for the past three years and the well discussed steady decline in membership of the Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Association in the past decade.

Finally, there are some disturbing indirect signs that things are not all going smoothly in the field of vocational evaluation. The Chan, Parker, and Lam study (1986) demonstrated that human service college students ranked vocational evaluation twenty eight out of thirty six in prestige of the occupations listed. Thereby, it was seen as more prestigious than floor supervisors and retail store managers, but less prestigious than nurses, policemen, work

adjustment counselors, and job placement specialists, fields which generally require less education.

There has been a trend toward the increasing use of psychometric tests, particularly aptitude tests, as the primary method of vocational evaluation. This runs counter to one of the very reasons the field broke from psychology and the reason Ghiselli (1956) and Neff (1977) suggested that psychometrics were unsuitable for vocational evaluation, i.e., they have no predictive validity. An explanation for this trend is that evaluators either do not know better or, more likely are being forced by time pressures to grasp at the quick and dirty rather than slow and accurate. In other words, evaluators are feeling pressured to see more people in less time to improve the cost/benefit. An example can be taken from Traver (1986) who instituted computerization of a vocational evaluation program and the elimination of work samples in a one to one manner to save money. He stated "Traditional Valpar and JEVS work sample administration required one to one testing by three evaluators working simultaneously. This testing was replaced by one evaluator working with groups of eight clients on a rotating basis (p. 76)". By computerizing to a more psychometric approach, Traver reported a reduction of 80% in the cost of reports. This illustration is typical of the move by vocational evaluators to embrace an old technology which may give them limited data but which apparently is being utilized to increase numbers. This trend runs counter to the notion of a profession controlling its own destiny to improve the services offered to clients. It is possible that one root cause of such a trend is the decreasing number of trained people available or being hired in response to more of today's youth opting away from human services to careers offering higher wages. Whatever the reason, vocational evaluation which has enjoyed its own distinct role in the vocational service delivery process may be losing its autonomy, control of its destiny, and professionalizing growth. It is time for those in the field to take positive steps to nurture the existence of this field to provide the best service it can to be entitled to remain in existence as a valued process.

The Issues: Group Reports from the Participants

At the Third National Forum on Issues in Vocational Assessment held in Clearwater, Florida in September, 1987, the participants were presented the ideas presented in the previous section. They were then randomly assigned to one of six groups of 15 people and asked to address the following three questions: 1. What are the issues in vocational evaluation; 2. Comment on those issues; and 3. What should the field of vocational evaluation do to address the issues? Following a thirty minute discussion, each group reported the following:

Group 1. The major issue is that we should be using our expertise in vocational evaluation. We should use our resources, e.g., vocational data like the Dictionary of Occupational Titles in that it bonds us together as professionals and gives us our identity. We need to be assertive and market our service to the rehabilitation team. Once we show our expertness, we can go to legislators and get what we want in the way of protection, however, we need to better define our commonalities. We need better standards of practice and a better more stable funding base. This group was greatly concerned with licenser, legislation for malpractice, and seeking a commonality in evaluation.

Group 2. The issues discussed by this group concerned the lack of outreach of evaluators to other evaluators and from VEWA to evaluators. They felt evaluators do not have a public image and lack influence in effecting legislation due to our own identity crises. Lastly, they felt that inappropriate people, i.e., administrators, were making decisions regarding purchase and use of vocational evaluation equipment. Some things they would like to see done included taking a more proactive role to unify evaluators in various work settings and making the professionalizing process a top priority. They requested a task force to establish guidelines for professionalization linking evaluators in the various sectors and for VEWA leadership to devote serious thinking to separating from the National Rehabilitation Association as being a part of NRA does not seem to serve the needs of vocational evaluators generically.

Group 3. Professionalism is the issue. There is a need for proper credentials, pay, and training. Money should be available for equipment and maintenance if the service is to be offered. They felt that we are not perceived as professional because even though there is confidence in evaluation, there are not enough competent people in the field. It was suggested that those who pay our bills control us and that we are too fragmented and need to develop a better group identity. This group recommended that research can be one answer to our dilemmas. Therefore, universities and training workshops should be teaching how to conduct and understand research. Secondly, we need to be able to generate funds to seed what we want to do. A suggestion was made to request seed money from equipment vendors for projects which benefit the entire profession and to get evaluators to commit one to five dollars each to fund projects. We need to better police our own field and improve our advertising of ourselves and our service. Lastly, they wanted a central office to provide a recognizable stable home of the profession.

Group 4. The number one perceived problem is lack of money in terms of having a stable base of funding for our services. The problem with our professional status is generated because of the lack of trained people to fill the needs and they want the process to become a Certified Vocational Evaluator to be more

demanding. They desired more standardization in our practice and worried about the ethics of evaluation in the private sector. They further worried about the influence of vendors in our profession and felt they have too much control of our process and therefore recommended setting standards for our own protection. This was one of several groups to recommend a national membership directory, listing evaluators by state and region. They also felt licenser would be helpful.

Group 5. This group saw the major current issue facing vocational evaluation as supported employment without vocational evaluation so that people are being placed without this service. They feel that the certification process is too loose and that we are stigmatized by the fact that anyone can be hired to do vocational evaluation. They recognized a need for a centralized organization to work with everybody doing vocational evaluation and that we should move ahead on licensure. They requested better networking within the field and for the professional organizations to do a better job of public relations about the field and membership benefits from belonging to the organization.

Group 6. Three issues emerged as the major ones to be addressed. Those were the lack of one professional organization for the field, the lack of a consistent educational standard for practitioners, and the lack of professional identity/credentials for practitioners. They therefore wanted to see the development of a separate professional organization just for vocational evaluation and the development of positive professional attitudes without the emphasis on the professional organization. We may need to put more emphasis on the individual taking a bigger load of the responsibility. They felt we are too dependent on federal funding for training and that it tends to control the educational content given to future professionals. They recommend that practitioners need more input into course content by having VEWA form an ad-hoc committee of educators and practitioners to work on this and develop accreditation standards for university programs. They felt we need a better definition of vocational evaluation, more marketing of our profession, and that we lack a professional identity.

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