

ARE THE TOOLS WE ARE USING NOW DELIVERING THE GOODS?

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Abstract

Almost anything related to marketing, trends, and leadership that is published these days states that individuals must begin to change mind sets, shift patterns of behavior, and learn new skills in order to meet the demands of the 21st Century. In vocational evaluation and assessment, this often means that the traditional process must be challenged. In order to be seen as a valued component of the educational process, vocational evaluation and assessment professionals must address the needs of students, parents, and other school personnel and market their services as an indispensable part of a comprehensive career guidance program. School-based evaluation and assessment services must be relevant to today's changing economy, educational reforms, and workforce initiatives. As new roles emerge for vocational evaluation and assessment personnel, personal and program evaluation is required, along with a willingness to change and address new service arenas. Beginning in 1995, the Center for Career Assessment Services of the Henrico County (Virginia) Public Schools initiated a strategic planning process which has radically changed the way in which the Center is viewed. Planning addressed all areas of the evaluation program, from the aesthetics of the physical location to the types of services offered to students and staff. The development model used by the Vocational Evaluators at the Center will be shared. Outcomes for both the Center and for students who receive evaluation and assessment services will be discussed.

Introduction

Al Condeluci, Executive Director of United Cerebral Palsy of Pittsburgh, author, university faculty member, and opening keynote speaker at the *1993 National Issues Forum*, often begins his presentations with the question: Is the formula -- the map -- we're using now delivering the goods? His response is that there may be other maps, other options and alternative ways of doing things, that will lead to greater productivity and a better life. Dr. Condeluci's overriding premise is that many of the problems faced by people today do not result from individual deficits, but rather from the failure of our communities and society in general to meet the needs of its members (Condeluci, 1997). This question is worth contemplating in regard to the changing nature of work and to the evolving roles of vocational evaluation, assessment, and work adjustment professionals. *Are the tools we are using now delivering the goods? If not, what are we planning to do about it?*

The Changing Workplace

There is no question that the pathways to work are changing. Education is changing with

more and more emphasis being placed on system accountability, integrated academic-vocational instruction, national and state skill standards, and implications of technology. The workforce is changing. Employers and employees alike struggle with the evolving nature of jobs, multiple skill demands, lifelong learning, a more diverse and aging work force -- to mention only a few of the changes which will impact the world of work as we know it. Employers are becoming multinational, streamlining and consolidating operations. The economic, environmental, technological, and political conditions which impact work are constantly affecting individual career paths. Some occupations are declining while others are growing at rates which make filling vacancies nearly impossible. The elements of the OLD workplace are being replaced with elements of a NEW workplace.

Elements of the OLD Workplace	Elements of the NEW Workplace
Structured	Flexible
Stable, secure	Changing, little security
Employer will take care of employees	Employees responsible for themselves
Financial incentives	Variety of incentives
Work for others	Self-employment
Local or national economy	Global economy
White, male influence	Multiethnic, female influence
Large employers	Small employers/units
Labor intensive	Knowledge intensive
Workers as instruments	Workers as human resources
Hierarchical	Participatory
Education is completed	Lifelong learning
Clear definition of duties	Many duties, cross-training common
Focus on product	Focus on customer
Dollar-driven	Value-driven

Source: *The Mid-Atlantic Guide to Information on Careers (MAGIC)*, 1997

Changing Roles of Evaluation and Work Adjustment Professionals

Numerous changes have been forced upon vocational evaluation and work adjustment in recent years with changes in federal and state legislative mandates, funding allocations, and shifts in service priorities. Still other changes have been a matter of choice, whether personal or administrative, such as the introduction of advanced computer technologies and new techniques. When change, especially unexpected change, forces us to rethink our ways of doing things and redirect our focus, leadership training would tell us that we must be quick to spot the hidden advantage in each new situation. The professional role each of us holds must be viewed differently and expanded to address the needs of consumers. New roles such as vocational/career expert, disability specialist, and educator are critical to enhancing the professions and marketing services (Thomas, 1997 and 1998). As professionals in the fields of vocational evaluation and work adjustment, we have an important role in helping individuals determine their career

pathways. It is critical that we be recognized as providing services that have value to all persons needing assistance with career development.

Inherent in the discussions and writings about the emerging roles of vocational evaluation and work adjustment professionals are several common threads.

- ◆ **There is a need for each professional to know and understand the demands of the multiple stakeholders being served.** The stakeholders differ based upon work setting. They include consumers of vocational evaluation and work adjustment services, rehabilitation counselors, guidance professionals, administrators, state and local governmental agencies, and funding sources. The necessity of understanding the demands of these groups was emphasized in a recent study undertaken by the Commission on Certification of Work Adjustment and Vocational Evaluation Specialists (CCWAVES) to help further the professional development of vocational evaluators (Newman, Waechter, Nolte, & Boyer-Stephens, 1998). Assessment services must be relevant to today's changing economy, educational reforms, and workforce initiatives. Each has its own group of stakeholders, placing unique service demands upon and expecting significant outcomes from our services.
- ◆ **Vocational evaluation and work adjustment professionals must demonstrate the ability to use a wide variety of assessment tools and techniques.** Vocational evaluation and work adjustment provide unique opportunities for self-exploration and career awareness for individuals seeking a career direction. To allow for maximum opportunities for personal discovery and decision-making, a variety of assessment instruments and techniques must be utilized to determine work-related interests, skills, and abilities (Leconte, 1993; Thomas, 1997). Change is inevitable, yet the majority of respondents to a 1996 survey of current trends and practices in vocational evaluation reported that there had not been a change in their tools and techniques (Modahl, 1997). In order to meet the demands of consumers, referring agents, funding sources, and changing economic and political climates, it is necessary to re-tool and rethink the traditional ways of doing things.
- ◆ **Choices of strategies and levels of vocational evaluation and assessment must be made available.** Different service options should be provided to adequately meet the diverse needs of many individuals. This is essential if vocational evaluation and work adjustment are to be viewed as indispensable components of comprehensive career guidance and preparation services (Leconte, 1993; Thomas, 1997). However, there continues to be a need for clarification and consistency in the use of terms and titles used to describe levels of service within our professions and for the identification of the levels and types of services recommended for specific groups of individuals (Modahl, 1997).
- ◆ **It is essential for the continuation of the professions that the visibility and recognition of vocational evaluation and work adjustment be enhanced.** Almost anything related to marketing, trends, and leadership that you read states that we must begin to change our mind set, shift our behavior, and learn new skills in order to fit the needs of the 21st Century. It is not going to be enough for us to continue to provide "nice" career-related programs in sheltered lab settings for people with disabilities or

injuries who want to go to work. We must shift to offering dynamic, flexible programs that have a visible benefit for **all** people. Services must begin to be marketed directly to consumers as available career development services which provide individuals with the resources necessary to make well-informed choices regarding education, training, and job placement (Thomas, 1998). We must begin to focus on education of the community at large which describe the benefits of what we do, market our services, and offer continuous public relations activities.

- ◆ **For survival, the professions of vocational evaluation and work adjustment must reach beyond the boundaries of traditional rehabilitation settings.** The professions of vocational evaluation and work adjustment cannot develop further by serving one field. Think for a moment of all the potential service arenas where individualized assessment of vocational skills and available occupational options can play a vital role. On a more personal level, think of the skills used as assessment professionals which can be transferred to related work settings in order to expand service horizons. Promoting the benefits of vocational evaluation and work adjustment because we believe in what we do and the opportunities it affords to others is critical, not taking the stance of self-preservation and job security.

The Biggest Job Worry...

A daily desk calendar boldly showed the following statement on November 13, 1996: *"The biggest job worry will be the opportunities you missed if you didn't experiment or try to improve things."* Albert Einstein put it another way when he was quoted as saying,

"The significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them."

All of the research, writings, and discussions about change in the workplace and changes in our professions will be useless unless each professional takes it upon him or herself to risk experimenting and thinking differently. I want to share with you how the process of writing a development plan which addressed the changing needs of consumers and local work place has led to drastic changes in my work setting.

In July, 1984, the Henrico County Public Schools (Richmond, VA) in cooperation with two neighboring counties submitted a project application to the Virginia Department of Education to establish Project REACH, a Regional Evaluation and Assessment Center for the Handicapped. As an essential component of the secondary program, Project REACH was to provide a comprehensive diagnostic approach to vocational assessment to assist students with disabilities to reach their fullest potential. The grant provided for the establishment of the Vocational Assessment Center (VAC), a center-based vocational evaluation program. A second grant from the Virginia Department of Education in 1986 allowed for expanded services to the entire student population as well as adults. From the beginning, the VAC was to serve a role in the vocational and transition planning process for students, specifically planning for the student's secondary

program.

Numerous other school-based evaluation programs in Virginia began under the same grants. The majority were regional programs established to serve more than one locality. Most developed around a traditional evaluation model and shared similar procedures for referral of students, the evaluation process, and report writing. Levels of vocational assessment for programs statewide were established as: (1) Level I - interviews, records review, interest inventories, (2) Level II - standardized instruments, career exploration activities, and (3) Level III - comprehensive vocational evaluation. The VEWAA Glossary classifies the levels as screening, clinical, and vocational evaluation (Dowd, 1993). The VAC and many other programs focused primarily on comprehensive evaluations. Over the years, these categories have become blurred in the school-based programs, leading education professionals to wonder exactly what students receive as part of a vocational evaluation.

To be bluntly honest, not much changed in terms of the methods and techniques used at the VAC during the first ten years of operation from 1985 - 1995. There had been minor changes in operating procedures, the addition of a few new work samples and instruments, and general format changes in reports, but nothing that demonstrated a true willingness to address the ever changing needs of students, parents, referral sources, and administrators. Several years ago, we were informed that the Assessment Center was thrown out on the table during discussions to reduce the overall school system operating budget. Reality hit hard. Reducing a yearly budget consisting of salaries, benefits, and less than \$5,000 in operating supply funds could not make a dent in a multimillion dollar school system budget unless you are talking about the entire program being dismantled. Discussions like that make you begin to think long and hard about the future.

The reaction could have been to take the easy route and continue with things as they had been for ten years. Everything would have been comfortable and unstressful, until the termination notices arrived. That was not the decision that was made. We began to rethink our methods, redesign the program, and establish a plan for the future. The decision was to make our services an indispensable part of the school system. The first step was to challenge the established process. We started leaving our center and being seen in the schools working with students. This served a two-fold purpose: (1) it required less time away from class for the students and (2) made the evaluators more visible to school personnel. We began to more strongly address the needs of students, parents, and teachers that we had been hearing for years including the amount of time students had to miss from class to participate in evaluation services, specific programming needs, and specialized services for certain groups of students. A wider range of services was offered, and we began to market what we could provide for particular students, classes, and staff members. It was necessary to decide how the two Vocational Evaluators at the Center could best serve the approximately 40,000 students in the school system. Where once was provided only traditional hands-on evaluations solely to specific populations, the Center began to offer an ever increasing array of services to all students. A level of service called a career screening was established to assist higher level students with exploration of their aptitudes and interests. This allowed the comprehensive vocational evaluation option to be better utilized by students needing the most intensive level of service. Opportunities for in-service training with staff members across the County also became available.

Within a year, our efforts began to pay off in a very unexpected way. The administrator

for the department overseeing the VAC requested that a development plan be written for the Center including everything from the physical appearance of the lab to service delivery. We were to develop a wish list of everything we would want to bring the program into the 1990's, no matter what the cost. Perhaps like many of you, we had never developed a plan for the future; we were too busy trying to maintain things on a day-to-day basis. We barely had money in the budget to keep up the level of service we were providing; we could not imagine having the funds to improve the Center and/or purchase new equipment.

The document that resulted, *A Vision for the Future...1995-1996 and Forward*, put forth a plan of action that required a great deal of risk. Recommendations were made in a wide variety of areas including new service options, painting and other construction-related projects, new work samples, supplies, computer systems and software; and a name change. A three-year planing component and follow-up data on students seen at the Center since its opening were also included in the document. The next step was to market the document in such a way as to inspire a shared vision for what the Center was capable of becoming. The plan was presented to all levels of administrators within the Division of Instruction for the school system. We were encouraged to undertake a new marketing plan which included public information services, individual meetings with principals and guidance personnel, and presentations at faculty meetings. We looked at other ways to integrate our services in Tech Prep initiatives, High Schools that Work grants, welfare reform efforts being coordinated through the adult education programs, and our Specialty Centers (magnet schools). All of this eventually led to a presentation to the School Board and inclusion of the recommendations for improvements to the Center in the annual plan submitted by the vocational/technical advisory council.

What has happened? Things definitely have not stayed the same. At times, we feel we have almost made our program too indispensable for *our cup definitely runneth over*. We have demonstrated to our colleagues in the system that our assessment services are useful to a much wider variety of students and adults than ever before. During the first full year of operation for the VAC, a total of 200 individuals received services. Ninety-two percent of those individuals were classified as exceptional education students.

<u>First Full Year of Operation - 1986-1987</u>	
19	Interest Assessments
13	Level II Assessments
168	Comprehensive Vocational Evaluations
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200	Total Number of Individuals Receiving Services

For the 1997-1998 school year, the statistics look very different.

1997-1998 Student Statistics

2,968	Interest Assessments	52% from middle school grades
314	Personality Assessments (Students and Staff)	
342	Career Screenings (Interest, Aptitude, Learning Style):	
		36% Disadvantaged Students
		31% Regular Education Students
		22% Exceptional Education Students
		11% Specialty Center Students
75	Comprehensive Vocational Evaluations:	
		83% Exceptional Education Students
		11% Regular Education Students
		6% Disadvantaged Students
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3,699	Total Number of Individuals Receiving Services	

We have also been able to show our success. Computer follow-up studies conducted yearly indicate that on average, seventy-one percent of students seen at the Center enroll in the technical/career preparation programs recommended in evaluation results. Seventy-four percent of the graduates in the class of 1996 who completed comprehensive evaluations were enrolled in recommended programs. Data collected on the grades of the 1996 graduates indicated that 93% of the students in recommended programs received a final grade of C or better in their program areas.

Most of the other recommendations in the development plan have been accomplished. One of the most important in terms of the image of the Center has been the name change. To reflect consistency within the school system, collaboration with state and county initiatives as well as the broader range of services, the name of the program was changed to the Center for Career Assessment Services. The name also reflects current trends and practices in the field. The traditional approach to vocational evaluation upon which the Center was modeled consisted of identifying a student's functional limitations, then selecting fields for the student that did not require functioning in deficit areas. This approach, while well documented and established, is limiting. Career assessment, by definition is a lifelong process for personal growth and continual learning. Career assessment is:

“A process providing useful information and experiences, beginning in elementary school and continuing through adulthood, that will assist an individual to develop educational plans to reach goals and develop skills related to employment and community living. Career assessment provides an ongoing, individual-centered monitoring of skills, interests, and values related to functioning in work, home, and community positions, and encompasses all individual assessment practices including: (1) psychological and educational assessment, (2) functional living skills

assessment (home and community), and (3) vocational assessment (work).”
(Sitlington, Brolin, Clark, & Vacanti, 1984)

Had we not chosen to take a critical look at our vocational evaluation program and make the changes necessary to meet the needs of our school system, I cannot say that the program would be in operation today. If we had not decided to become more visible and take the time to market our services to new referral sources and the community, we may have joined the ranks of school-based programs no longer in operation. To have continued on the path initially laid out for the program would have at some point brought the services to a sudden halt.

Conclusion

Changes in the world of work will continue to come about at a startling pace. When the focus of the professions is work, vocational evaluation and work adjustment must be willing to address these changes to meet the needs of a diverse client base. In editorial comments addressing today's workplace and work force printed in the January edition of *Techniques*, the journal of the Association for Career and Technical Education, Ricardo Valencia, Director of Education for USA Today, stated that,

“As educators and employers, we must quickly respond to the nature and reality of change if we're to keep our commitment to the students who look to us and to what we do as the keys to unlocking their economic and social futures.” (p. 50)

You have just read how one vocational evaluation program has attempted to address these workplace changes and locally identified needs. It is also evident that the roles of the Vocational Evaluators involved reflect the evolving nature of our professions.

Each of us must decide which role we will take in unlocking the futures of those with whom we work, whether students, rehabilitation service consumers, displaced workers, welfare-to-work participants, or any other individual seeking assistance with career development issues. *Are the tools we are using delivering the goods? If not, what are we planning to do about it?* Each of us must analyze our core values, assess our skills, examine our roles and responsibilities, and then, consciously choose how we will proceed. There is a bright future ahead for the students with whom I work and for the role of vocational evaluation and assessment in helping them take the first steps along their career pathways. I choose to lead the way and hope that you will join me.

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