

Development and Implementation of the Virginia Vocational Evaluation Customer Satisfaction Process

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how one state approached program improvement and enhancement during a period of cost cutting. This article discusses how Virginia targeted vocational evaluation customers (vocational rehabilitation field counselors) to determine their service needs and how that information changed the delivery of vocational evaluation services in that state.

Introduction

With reduced staff after the 1994 Virginia Legislature passed the "Workforce Transition Act", the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services was forced to meet increased employment expectations with less staff. While some states vocational rehabilitation agencies met decreases among number of staff by eliminating vocational evaluator positions, Virginia felt that vocational assessment services contributed to positive vocational outcomes. Previous research has demonstrated the value of evaluation, counseling, job readiness assessment and integration of computer technology as a part of enhanced state vocational rehabilitation outcomes in the provision of services to people with disabilities (Lightner, J., 1994). In addition, it was clear that many customers of the agency with severe disabilities would not be able to perform at their maximum potential without the integration of assistive technology into the vocational evaluation process (Langton, A., 1991). However, it was determined based on informal discussions with vocational rehabilitation counselors in the field that vocational evaluation services needed to be streamlined to meet the needs of its primary referral

- Report formats were revised to make them more understandable and “user friendly” to both the vocational rehabilitation counselor as well as the customer. Report turn around times were also reduced to a standard of five working days from completion of assessment to receipt of report.
- Job analysis was seen as a method of supporting job development and placement efforts of field vocational rehabilitation counselors. All vocational evaluation staff received intensive training from Collaborative Vocational Evaluation and Training Program at The George Washington University in job analysis to assist them in making appropriate job matches and job site assessments.
- Rehabilitation technology, computers and software were integrated into the vocational rehabilitation assessment process. This enhanced the agency’s ability to assess the potential for careers in technology as well as offering greater opportunities for persons with severe physical disabilities to access hardware. Nine days of training were provided to vocational evaluation staff at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in this area to enhance knowledge and skills in this area.

Follow-up

In 1998, a follow up survey was conducted to determine if the restructuring of vocational evaluation services based on the 1996 focus group results was meeting the needs of referring vocational rehabilitation counselors in the field. Surveys were sent to 207 caseload carrying counselors throughout the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services. Counselors were reminded that focus groups had been conducted two years prior to determine how well vocational evaluation services were meeting their needs and the current survey was an effort to provide additional feedback on the agency’s response to those changes. The survey was designed to elicit responses related to usage, value of current services, programmatic recommendations and general comments about the current state of vocational evaluation services within the agency. A survey format

versus focus group approach was selected in the interest of time and in order to afford the opportunity for all staff to participate. Several staff reported difficulty attending the 1996 local focus groups and requested that future research should be expanded to a larger pool of potential respondents. State agency program evaluation staff assisted in the development of the questionnaire.

Survey responses were received from 55% of the counselors. The results indicated that:

- 98% of respondents had accessed vocational evaluation services during the previous year
- 50% had used prescription vocational evaluation services
- 60% had used verbal consultation services
- 18% had referred customers for job analysis
- 14% had used situational assessment services
- 99% found the vocational evaluation reports helpful in providing services to customers of the agency

In terms of beneficial services from vocational evaluation, the following responses were noted . The most frequently mentioned is listed first.

- In-house vocational assessment
- Incorporate of assistive technology in vocational assessment recommendations
- Transferable skills analysis
- Job analysis

When questioned about how vocational assessment services could be improved, the following items were recommended and are listed by frequency of response. The most frequently mentioned are listed first.

- Greater access to vocational evaluation services for rural offices
- Waiting lists to access services need to be shortened
- Eliminate background information on the reports
- Increase and expand training recommendations

Implications

The findings of the follow-up survey on recommendations to enhance vocational evaluation services to the vocational rehabilitation counselors in the field demonstrated that the changes instituted as a result of the 1996 focus group recommendations had been of benefit to vocational rehabilitation counselors in the field. It should be noted that in the 1998 Survey many concerns voiced in the original focus groups are now seen as strengths. These included the integration of rehabilitation technology in the vocational assessment process and job analysis. The respondents pointed out that while there had been improvement in services there were still areas of potential improvement.

There continues to be a demand for vocational evaluation services based on the large number of persons referred for assessment. Last fiscal year (1998), there were 10,021 units of vocational evaluation services provided to customers of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services. These services included vocational evaluations, job analysis, situational assessments, consultations, and rehabilitation technology reviews. Days from completion of services to reports were reduced in field services statewide to 2.9 days (Management Report, 1998) from 5 days in 1995. This growth in provision of services and timeliness has been about a five percent change each year since implementation of the recommendations. It is also important to note that not only were services reconfigured but job responsibilities and duties were also added to existing position descriptions for vocational evaluation staff. In addition to traditional vocational evaluation services, provided by the agency in the past, performance expectations

included job analysis conducted in the community, and rehabilitation technology assessments. Case consultations which had been done on an informal basis by some vocational evaluation staff were formalized with a requirement to participate in regularly scheduled case reviews with field staff and to assist employment staff in presentations to current and potential employers in the community.

Recommendations

In order to determine benefit of services to a state vocational rehabilitation agency it is imperative that customers should be consulted to determine their service needs to meet employment objectives. The vocational rehabilitation field counselors of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services reported in 1996 and again in 1998 that they desired and found benefit in agency vocational rehabilitation services. The vocational evaluation services at the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services The Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services Vocational Evaluation Services will continue to address concerns raised by referring field counselors. Regularly scheduled meetings to brief field staff have been instituted on an annual basis throughout the state to report back on recommended changes and to respond to issues and concerns about assessment services. In addition to feedback from referring vocational rehabilitation counselors, follow-up surveys were re-instituted in the field vocational rehabilitation offices for agency service recipients in order to meet the needs and expectations of all vocational evaluation customers.

The feedback provided by agency customers must continue to be collected and reviewed on a regular basis by agency management. This information can be used in budget development and program planning to enhance the quality and timeliness of services. In order to keep up with the changing technologies and innovations in the field, there is a need for continuing education and training for all vocational evaluation staff. In addition, there is an on-going need to keep computer and other technologies maintained and up-dated in order to provide quality services. This must occur while maintaining relationships with vocational rehabilitation counselors to keep lines of communication open enhancing services to customers of the agency. With the increased demands for services to persons with severe disabilities and the intensity of services this requires, there is an on-going need for examination of agency priorities and staff allocations.

References

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