

EMPLOYER-BASED REHABILITATION
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ABSTRACT

This article examines a new methodology in the field of vocational rehabilitation called Employer-Based Rehabilitation. This approach involves conducting as much of the rehabilitation process as possible in the context of real work sites. Special attention is paid to the assessment of functional work skills. Research drawn from systems analysis and cognitive learning provide the theoretical constructs for this approach. The benefits of this approach are two-fold. First of all, in-context assessments produce results that hold a high degree of face validity for the client, thus increasing compliance and follow through. Secondly, in-context assessments produce results that are durable in the real world of work, leading to positive employment outcomes. The application of employer-based rehabilitation techniques requires specific skill sets, which constitute future professional development suggestions.

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Added to this is the complication of current economic conditions. In response to this, many sectors of the social welfare system have made significant changes. For instance, WSIB has instituted reform measures that reduce the amount of direct rehabilitation services. The new focus is workplace party self-reliance, accompanied by a stiff set of rights and obligations for both employers and injured workers. Insurance companies are critically examining the monies they pay out for rehabilitation plans, looking for accountability and outcomes. Workfare measures and tighter eligibility requirements have hit the municipal General Welfare Assistance sector. Provincial VRS programs are re-organizing their entire delivery system. The bottom line is, there is no more money — anywhere.

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When vocational rehabilitation services are examined in light of the realities of both the labour market *and* current economic conditions, the answer is clear. Find the shortest route to rehabilitation. Get the client back to work as soon as possible.

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Employer-Based Rehabilitation is an approach that can maximize efforts to strengthen the ties between clients and employers. Insurance companies are looking at rehabilitation plans that incorporate “real work” as an aspect of treatment in order to minimize the time the client is out of the labour force. Municipal income maintenance programs are emphasizing a “work for welfare” approach, in order to tie work to benefits. And Vocational Rehabilitation Services in Ontario is considering how it can re-focus its efforts onto job placement services for employable people in order to streamline service delivery. For all of these reasons, Employer-Based Rehabilitation is a method that can solve many of the massive challenges facing our service delivery system in the ‘90s.

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In-Context Assessments

Vocational rehabilitation can be defined as a series of six identifiable stages: Screening, Diagnostics, Work Evaluation, Adjustment Planning, Work Hardening, and Job Placement (Wright, 1980). The first four stages involve conducting tests and evaluations designed to answer specific assessment questions, like *“Is this person employable?”*, *“If this person is employable, what jobs is he or she suited for and what do they need to get that job?”*, *“Is there a job like that anyway in this person’s local labour market?”* and, finally, *“What should happen next?”* (Lougheed & Hunter 1994). It is clear that in order to move quickly and effectively through this entire rehabilitation process, our ability to *predict* what a person will be able to do during the assessment stages is paramount (Wright 1980).

In Employer-Based Rehabilitation, one of the most notable features of the *assessment phase* is that functional work skills testing is conducted in real work environments. This is called an “in-context” assessment.

A brief explanation of systems theory helps to define why “in-context” assessments are effective. Peter Senge (1990), a well-known contemporary author who studies the relationship between human behaviour and systems, recently wrote that *when people, no matter how different, are placed in the same system (environment), they begin to behave the same and produce the same results*. Cognitive learning theorists have known this for some time. Albert Bandura (1977, 1986) labelled this phenomenon “reciprocal interaction”, and described it as a process involving the following series of events: a person behaves in a certain way; this causes a response in their immediate environment; the person then reacts to the response or cue from their environment

with another behaviour. Simply put, people in the same environment behave in similar ways because they are responding to similar cues.

When you apply this theory to vocational assessments, a fascinating trend emerges. Clients who are placed in the context of real work during their vocational assessment begin, very quickly, to *act like workers*. They are responding to the same cues as other workers in their environment.

When a clients are acting like workers, a number of benefits arise for both clients and the assessor.

1. *Clients experience elevated levels of self-esteem, facilitating faster movement through the rehabilitation process.*

In our culture, work is viewed as a valuable and worthwhile activity. When clients begins to feel like workers, they experience feelings of self-worth and respect. This is a critical factor in any client's successful rehabilitation (Janis 1982). In order to move through those six steps in the rehabilitation process, clients must have enough self-esteem to motivate them to make the necessary changes inherent in becoming independent. The development of self-esteem can begin with the real-life experience of being assessed in a work place.

2. *Testing has excellent face validity, facilitating client acceptance and compliance.*

Face validity is one of the criteria used to measure the effectiveness of a test. It refers to whether the test being administered looks as though it measures what it is designed to measure (Adams-Webber 1996). Testing for work capacities by actually doing real work in real-work environments has a high degree of face validity. This encourages clients to become engaged in

the assessment process (Healy 1990). In addition, test results are viewed in a more favourable light by clients, as there is *no mystery* as to how those results were produced. This leads to the development of rehabilitation plans which enhance client acceptance and compliance.

3. *Both work skills and work behaviours can be assessed, increasing the predictive value of assessment results.*

Research into employability and job retention indicates that the primary reason people cannot get a job or keep a job is not due to lack of work *skills*, but rather due to lack of work *behaviours* (Brown 1983) — sometimes referred to as associated work skills or soft skills. This has become an even more critical factor in the current labour market. It is hard to assess work behaviours unless clients are actually trying to behave like workers, and the very best way to get clients to behave like workers is to place them in a work environment where reciprocal interaction will be in effect.

Motivation, Self-Efficacy, and Follow-Through

The necessary mandate of vocational services is to facilitate the fastest return to work possible. This means coming up with realistic answers to the four assessment questions mentioned above — answers that will stand up in terms of both labour market opportunities and client follow-through.

It is a fairly straight forward procedure to find out about local labour market opportunities. Many rehabilitation consultants now routinely conduct a formal labour market analysis as an integral part of any assessment.

Client follow-through is more challenging. To accurately predict the likelihood of client follow-through, it is important to understand what motivates people, and how to capture and use this motivation to propel clients quickly through the entire rehabilitation process.

Research into what motivates people indicates that we will only follow through with activities that we believe we are capable of doing (Betz and Hackett 1981). These beliefs, called “self-efficacy expectations”, relate not so much to one’s objective skills as to one’s *beliefs* about personal capabilities. When people get pushed into activities that they do not believe they are capable of, they tend to quit in response to even minor difficulties. Many of us working in rehabilitation have had the frustrating experience of working with a client who quits a wonderful job in response to some problem that, in our eyes, appears quite easy to solve. It is likely that self-efficacy beliefs are at work in this situation.

The challenge in Employer-Based Rehabilitation is to define clients' self-efficacy beliefs, and then facilitate an increase in these beliefs. The goal is to help clients achieve a sufficient level of self-efficacy beliefs to move from a position of dependence to one of self-directed behaviour during their rehabilitation. This is where the unique assessment design of Employer-Based Assessments is particularly helpful.

There are two important principles inherent in the design of an Employer-Based Assessment. First, the most effective way to find out what clients' self-efficacy beliefs are, is to have them participate in authentic experiences (actual as opposed to simulated activities) and measure their own performance (Krumboltz & Thorenson 1961, Bandura 1986). Second, the most effective

way to increase levels of self-efficacy (that is, facilitate learning, growth, and change) is to allow clients to try increasingly demanding activities in an authentic environment (Knowles 1980, Abbey-Livingston and Kelleher 1988, Senge 1990).

When these principles are applied to assessment design, the result is a process that involves the systematic tracking of clients' capabilities in response to real work activities. For example, one work environment that has been frequently used as an employer-based test site is the warehouse department of Home Hardware Stores. One of the specific jobs there is pricing flashlight batteries. The process of assessment involves working alongside the client for the entire testing time, completing the same functional activities together. At regular intervals (usually one hour), the assessor and the client stop to examine the functional work demands embedded in the job.

Every job has physical, emotional, and cognitive demands (Lougheed, 1996). For instance, for the job of pricing flashlight batteries, the physical demands would include:

- standing on concrete
- lifting under 10 lbs.
- fine motor control
- and other additional physical demands.

The emotional demands would include:

- suitability of repetitive work
- working with others
- working in a chaotic environment

- and other additional emotional demands.

The cognitive demands would include:

- reading
- numeracy
- comprehending instructions
- and other additional cognitive demands.

This partial list illustrates the demands embedded in a job. An important feature of this list is that it is written in everyday language, so the client can understand what the terms means.

Once this list is completed, the assessor then helps the client to rate their own capacity for each identified work demand, using a numerical/descriptive adjective rating scale. Use of such a rating scale is another important feature, because it helps clients to organize and report their observations in a consistent fashion (Colten and Janis 1982, McCue et. al. 1994, Pruitt 1986), which, in turn, leads to consistent test results. If physical and emotional baseline scores are incorporated into this process, on-going tolerance data can also be reported, rounding out the assessment results.

A complete Employer-Based Assessment involves conducting this process in a variety of different work sites (preferably four), in order to gather a broad range of functional work capacities and to increase the reliability of the results (Polster & Lynch 1981). Each work site should last for three to four hours, and the assessor remains on-site for the entire testing time.

This procedure can be completed with individual clients, or in small groups of up to five.

Final results from all test sites are averaged together and plotted on a graph. The vertical axis of the graph details each specific physical, emotional and cognitive functions. The horizontal axis provides a percentage rating for each function, in terms of employability.

A number of benefits arise during the Employer-Based Assessment process.

1. Clients' self-efficacy beliefs are defined, raising the predictive value of test results.

The rating scores themselves give both clients and the assessor insight into each client's self-efficacy beliefs. This is critical when predicting what should happen next. Research indicates that self-efficacy beliefs are the highest predictors of future behaviour (Schrauger & Osberg 1981, Brooks 1990).

2. Client develop the potential for independence — quickly.

As clients go through the process of repeatedly observing and scoring their functional work capacities at real work sites, they begin to develop a heightened degree of self-awareness. This is critical from a cognitive standpoint. Research indicates that self-awareness is the first essential step in becoming independent. Once people develop self-awareness, they can develop self-control, and this in turn leads to self-directed change (Bandura 1986). It is an incremental, step-by-step process. Systematically recording events and personal changes while performing specific activities (Janis 1982) speeds up the developmental process.

3. *Assessment results present a list of transferable skills, which can easily be integrated with a local labour market analysis to produce reliable job matches.*

The first thing that one notices about the functional demands analysis list is that it looks like a list of transferable skills — and indeed, that is just what it is. By focusing on functional demands rather than the total job itself, the results of an employer-based assessment can easily dovetail with the traditional job-matching approach, wherein the traits of an individual are matched with the factors of a job (Parsons 1909). The addition of a local and recent labour market analysis can produce a comprehensive and accurate assessment.

4. *Clients are engaged and motivated, increasing the likelihood of follow-through.*

The motivation to act comes from feeling in control and capable (Krumboltz & Thorenson 1964, Krumboltz & Schroeder 1965, Abbey-Livingston and Kelleher 1988). The design of the Employer-Based Assessment described above casts clients in a powerful position. The shift away from the “test and tell” approach enhances motivation by giving clients the actual experience of being in control and developing their own answers (Crites 1981).

Hitting the Ground Running

In order to hit the ground running, rehabilitation professionals and their clients must be “in tune” with the realities and demands of the current labour market. As rehabilitation consultants, we can help them do this by placing them in the context of the real work environment right from the initial stages of their rehabilitation. We can speed up the process by using an assessment design that casts clients in a powerful, strategic position that maximizes their ability to become independent.

In order to maximize *our* ability to conduct Employer-Based Rehabilitation, there are several new strategies and techniques that we need to learn. The following compendium of skills provides some direction for our own professional development over the next five years:

- understanding cognitive learning theory and adult learning theory as they relate to the rehabilitation process
- increasing the validity and reliability of single-subject design tests in a vocational assessment
- completing an effective functional demands analysis and facilitating client self-scoring of functional capacities
- setting up work sites in the community and working effectively with employers.

Armed with these new skills, we all have the best chance possible of “hitting the ground running!”

This article was originally published in *Canadian Journal of Rehabilitation*, Volume 12, Number 1, Fall 1998.

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