

Empowering the Evaluator: Gaining Autonomy as a Profession

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Abstract: Vocational evaluation needs to develop less reliance on legislation and more on its role as a career development and employment outcome service. Greater emphasis must also be placed on the consumer as customer and on broadening the evaluator's customer pool to include the general public. As the profession continues to demonstrate its effectiveness and social value as a viable career development service, evaluators will gain greater control over their profession and ensure an even more important role in rehabilitation and transition markets. As evaluators learn to recognize and interpret social trends, they will be in a unique position to develop new opportunities and markets for their services.

Current Problems Facing Vocational Evaluation and Assessment

- A. Vocational evaluation has been considered by some to be dying, behind the times, ineffective, and having outlived its usefulness (Thomas, 1999). We are at this Forum today because even though we know vocational evaluation is viewed with less interest in some circles, it is still a very meaningful and viable service.
- B. There is limited time and money available to take advantage of a variety of essential services. Consumers are being provided with fewer services that can optimize potential, resulting in fewer available options and opportunities for meaningful career development and employment.
- C. More emphasis is being placed on immediate employment rather than the provision of services that can result in long-term career development. Outcome-based delivery models are driving many rehabilitation and welfare-to-work programs.
- D. Less and less legislation, regulations, and policies are being written that mandate or support vocational evaluation services.
- E. Counselors and case managers are being encouraged to do more of their own quick assessments (e.g., non-standardized self-report inventories, file reviews, interviews, transferable skills assessments) at times when a vocational evaluation would be more appropriate. This "do-it-yourself" attitude can result in an unwillingness to conduct or rely on any type of formal vocational evaluation or assessment.

- F. Most evaluation units (or practices) rely on referrals from state or federal agencies for their livelihood rather than generating referrals from business, industry, or the general public. When agency referrals dry up, many units close rather than take the time to generate new and untapped markets.

With jobs plentiful in today's employment market, some service agencies and providers may not feel evaluation is needed for assistance in job planning and placement. And if fewer services are being used prior to job placement, then the role of vocational evaluation will be diminished. If rehabilitation and other work-related agencies reach a point where the only service they offer is job placement, then public and private employment agencies will eventually take their place. However, the reality is that meaningful, long-term employment cannot be provided to hard-to-employ populations without some form of assessment and work readiness services. The question is how long can vocational evaluation and work adjustment last until rehabilitation and other employment transition agencies rediscover the need for our services. The answer lies in how well we empower ourselves as autonomous professionals, and recognize the value of our service to others, with and without disabilities.

Approaches to Dealing with the Identified Problems

Following are some strategies that can help us effectively address the problems I just reviewed. If properly implemented, these approaches will help us gain greater control over our futures and autonomy in service delivery.

Market by Outcome - Rely less on legislation and more on marketing our role as career development and employment outcome experts. If vocational evaluation is not covered as an approved service in legislation, regulations, or policy, find out if employment or career development are and sell your service as an integral part of that outcome. Any evaluation service should first market itself by its outcome orientation (i.e., employment and/or career development), and then describe the process used to successfully achieve that goal. If we prove to be of value to agencies engaged in career development and employment, and to individuals seeking such help, then we will always have a market for our services (i.e., vocational evaluation and assessment will be considered an integral and inseparable part of successful career development and employment). We are not as much in the business of rehabilitation and transition as we are in the business of employment outcome. As Stephen Covey, a well-known writer and speaker in business leadership succinctly put it, "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989). By explaining the outcome of our service to potential consumers first (meaningful employment and career development), they will have a better understanding of and appreciation for the evaluation process when it is explained next. I have been criticized for using quotes from more popular writers who have the attention of business, industry, and the general public. It is this criticism that reveals one of our major problems; we are not willing (or do not know how) to appeal to business, industry, and the general public

Market to the Consumer - Greater emphasis must also be placed on the **consumer as customer** and on broadening the evaluator's customer pool to include the general public.

As long as the field of evaluation relies on the willingness of public and private agencies to make referrals, we will never be truly autonomous. You may ask, why would we market to consumers when referrals for evaluation are typically made by other professionals? Let us examine a similar practice in advertising found on television today—advertising drugs that can only be prescribed by a physician. One of the earliest of these prescription drugs to be advertised to the general public dealt with hair loss in men. Today, they cover such medical problems as toenail fungus, ED (or Erectile Dysfunction—as bravely disclosed by Bob Dole), suppression of venereal diseases such as Herpes, and arthritis in both people and dogs, to name a few. And if your physician, or veterinarian, cannot or will not prescribe your medication of choice you can call the manufacturer's advertised 800 number to find a doctor who will. In France, the manufacturer of a new, quieter form of rubberized road surfacing material advertised on television with the idea that politicians would be pressured by the general public to pave their streets and highways with this new material.

By now the trend is obvious, consumers are expected to demand needed products and services from other professionals, they themselves cannot purchase. Ultimately, I would like to see consumers, and their families, demand vocational evaluation services by name from their counselors, teachers, and case managers. In situations where consumers choose their service providers or rehabilitation or employment teams, they should know enough about the value of evaluation as a personal career development resource to specifically request the services of a vocational evaluator.

When and how would we market to consumers? Although we can take our lead from pharmaceutical advertising seen on television, this process will take strategic planning and practice on the part of the evaluator and our profession. One simple approach is to create separate brochures for both referral sources and consumers. They should be focused on the use of evaluation and assessment as a career development and employment outcome service that helps the consumer make informed choices. Consumer brochures should be given to referral sources free of charge to distribute to all consumers as an orientation tool to vocational evaluation. Referral agents should be informed through their brochures that the consumer brochures will make their job of orientation to the evaluation service quicker and easier, freeing their time for other job demands. Consumer-based brochures can be supplemented with video or audio tape orientations and employment success stories based on evaluation results. The brochures should be designed as though the evaluator was marketing to the general public. As consumers discover the value of vocational evaluation in identifying career options, their satisfaction with the service will be spread word-of-mouth throughout their personal networks. Running creative career assessment and development advertisements in the Yellow Pages will provide public visibility as well as the potential for referrals from the general public, business, and industry.

We are so busy catering to our own needs and those of other “professionals” that we often do not see the opportunities beyond our own disciplines. Vocational evaluation and assessment is a service that has value to everyone, not just individuals with disabilities. When people in the general public see the value of evaluation in addressing their own

career development needs, then individuals with disabilities will give it the same level of respect. As the profession continues to demonstrate its effectiveness and social value as a viable career development service, evaluators will gain greater control over their profession and ensure an even more important role in rehabilitation and transition markets.

Expand Services Offered – Increase the number and type of employment-related services offered. Some of the early publications on vocational evaluation referred to its concomitant relationship with work adjustment (i.e., work adjustment occurs during vocational evaluation and vocational evaluation occurs during work adjustment) (Hoffman, 1971; Tenth Institute on Rehabilitation Services, 1972). Over time, evaluation and adjustment have grown in different directions, even though the disciplines remain compatible in their goals of employment outcome. Evaluators in many public and private settings have used various combinations of evaluation, career education and exploration, work adjustment and/or job readiness training (job seeking and job survival skills) services as a part of their employment outcome process. Vocational evaluators may find it useful to offer a range of employment readiness services to consumers, as they are warranted. It has been my experience in providing career assessment and counseling services to workers seeking new career directions that their knowledge and skills in the job seeking process are deficient. Having been employed for 15 or more years, they have lost their skills in finding job opportunities, putting together professional resumes, and interviewing effectively.

Problems and deficiencies identified in vocational evaluation and assessment can be addressed by evaluators through the adjustment and job readiness services they offer (i.e., everything needed to find, acquire, and maintain employment can be obtained under one roof). For evaluators with technical skills in areas such as assistive technology, these services would also be a logical extension of the vocational evaluation service. This would apply to the specific skills needed to serve a particular disability group. For example, evaluators who work with individuals who have a traumatic brain injury may offer services such as specialized assistive technology, cognitive retraining, and job analysis as needed to enhance successful job placement and maintenance. The expansion of vocational evaluation into other work adjustment and readiness services will have a significant impact on professional education and certification in the field.

Redesign and Realign Services – To ensure the delivery of a full range of evaluation and employment readiness services, vocational evaluators should consider including other community-based service providers within their practice. Depending on the focus of the evaluation service (e.g., general public and/or specific disability group), evaluators can align themselves with job placement and employment specialists, rehabilitation engineers, counselors, psychologists, physicians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and/or employee assistance program specialists, to name a few.

Private practice groups or teams possibly referred to as “Career Development Co-ops,” could pool the creative and professional resources of various professionals to accomplish a range of career related services from evaluation and job readiness, to job placement and follow-along. For example, a team composed of an evaluator, rehabilitation counselor,

work adjustment specialist, and job development/job placement specialist could serve groups of individuals including job changers, outplacement participants, and individuals with disabilities and other barriers to employment. Rather than using a linear approach where participants move from one service to another in a logical fashion, a more circular flow could be initiated thus permitting consumers to revisit services as needed. For example, evaluation may be used a second time if employment interests change during the career exploration process, or when the participant nears the placement phase without a specific job goal in mind. Evaluators need to realign themselves with different professionals or groups, or add different professionals to their Co-op, in order to take advantage of newly emerging service directions (e.g., serving the aging baby boomer population); or as third party payers require a license or certification not held by or available to the evaluator or current staff.

In addition to providing standard reports to referral sources, vocational evaluators will need to offer consumers evaluation information to aid in the process of informed choice. The use of consumer-generated profiles and portfolios should be a routine part of the evaluation process so that participants gain ownership in the process. Teaching self-assessment and career development skills to consumers will ensure the continued use and update of evaluation information. As vocational evaluators serve more job seekers and job changers from the general population, profiles and portfolios will take the place of the traditional evaluation report. When some previous consumers consider a job move, they may reschedule another visit with the evaluator in order to update their profile or portfolio and seek additional advice on career planning.

Seize New Opportunities - As evaluators learn to recognize and interpret (and even forecast) social trends and data, they will be in a unique position to develop new opportunities and markets for their services. Let us examine three possible opportunities, or markets for vocational evaluation services.

1. In 1995, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that the average American will make 8 job changes in a lifetime; approximately one job change every 5 ½ years (Gray & Alphonso, 1996). Vocational evaluators can offer their services to individuals as a resource for choosing appropriate jobs and planning career directions, so that future job changes are meaningful and satisfying. Throughout workers' careers, evaluators can assist them in finding new and rewarding employment, and help them in achieving career-life satisfaction as well. The interests, temperaments/values, skills, and aptitude results generated in vocational evaluation can also be used to help participants improve overall quality of life decisions and directions; as based more on identified interests and potential rather than on trial and error.

2. Within the past year, an event occurred that has changed the attitude of many older Americans about how they approach their futures. This change in attitude can be associated with one name—John Glenn. After this 70+ year old Senator flew a successful mission as an Astronaut, extensive news coverage emphasized the ability and competence of someone his age to orbit in space and conduct rigorous

experiments. Scores of senior citizens interviewed by the media viewed his accomplishment as an inspiration in their own lives to pursue more active lifestyles, including re-employment. Vocational evaluation can be positioned to assist this segment of society with opportunities for re-careering, basic employment, or achieving personal goals such as returning to school.

3. The “baby boomer” generation is aging and will soon create one of the largest groups of retirees in the nation’s history. Some “boomers” will retire, some will continue to work in their chosen careers, others will find new careers out of interest or necessity, and all will seek more meaningful lives. Baby boomers will redefine work as they stay in the labor market or in some kind of entrepreneurial activity longer. Vocational evaluation can assist in redefining and redirecting work for this and following generations, if it is sensitive to these changes and how to meet them.

Prepare and Practice Marketing Strategies – Vocational evaluators, evaluation practices, and the profession must plan strategies to successfully expand and market our services to society both now and in the future. This includes forecasting and positioning our profession for new opportunities. Our goal is to convince consumers, referral sources, and the public at large that vocational evaluation has value to anyone seeking career direction and employment. This will take time and practice but will result in our autonomy and control over our futures and our profession.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. You are not marketing vocational evaluation/assessment as much as you are marketing an employment outcome/career development service. If vocational evaluation is not on a list of approved services, determine if employment outcome/career development services are and educate the potential referral source in the many ways evaluation, and its related services (see #4) can be used to improve quality outcomes.
2. Market your skills as a vocational/career expert before marketing your vocational evaluation process. As stated in #1, focus on outcome (employment/career development) rather than process (vocational evaluation).
3. The consumer is your most important customer. They should be marketed and educated as much as referral sources. Consumers should know enough about the benefits of vocational evaluation in their own employment/career development processes to request it by name.
4. Broaden vocational evaluation to offer other employment services the field has provided in the past, and is the logical place for these services to be housed in the future. This includes career education and exploration, work adjustment, job seeking and job survival skills training, and long-range career planning (i.e., most all aspects of the choose, get, keep process). Include other services logically associated with

vocational evaluation, such as assistive technology, job analysis, and ADA consultation to name a few.

5. Explain how users of appropriate vocational evaluation/assessment services can learn life-long self-assessment, career development, and employment skills, thus reducing reliance on more extensive and costly service delivery. When future problems or questions in direction arise, returning to vocational evaluation again may be all consumers need to get back on track.
6. Continue to look for, and forecast, new and emerging opportunities for the delivery of vocational evaluation services to all sectors of society. New trends and opportunities frequently present themselves, and evaluators need to know how to recognize these in relation to developing new markets for service delivery.
7. Develop and practice the techniques and strategies to make the process of marketing meaningful, practical, and convincing to consumers and referral sources.

We do not value physicians for their medical procedures, but for their ability to make us well. We do not value automobile mechanics for their ability to work on cars, but for their ability to fix them...the first time. Likewise, vocational evaluation will not be valued for its service or its process, but for its outcome (employment and career development).

What I have proposed is not easy to accomplish and it will take much time and effort, but control over our professional direction can be achieved. A previous VEWAA President, Marsha Anderson (DeBeer, 1985, p. 56), gives the following useful guidelines for attaining our own career goals.

You can create your own climate for innovation by remembering:

1. Work can be fun.
2. Dream - imagine the ideal. After that, you can make it practical.
3. Don't be afraid your innovation is unimportant - if it improves something, it is important.
4. Strive for excellence in your profession - innovation springs from this.
5. Celebrate failures as well as successes. Successive approximations to the ideal create an opportunity to learn how to create the idea.

If the ideas I have presented here today can be refined and operationalized for use at local levels, vocational evaluators will be able to improve their recognition and value to society, take control of their profession, and set an exciting course for the future.

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