

Integrating Rehabilitation Technology into the Vocational Assessment Process

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Abstract

State vocational rehabilitation agencies are mandated to serve persons with severe disabilities. This paper focuses on how one state integrated rehabilitation technology into the vocational assessment process to enhance employment outcomes for persons with severe physical disabilities. It also discusses the method used to determine needs in this area and how recommendations were implemented. Additional resources are suggested.

Introduction

During the Spring of 1996 focus groups were held throughout the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services to examine the current state of in-house vocational evaluation services. The agency was forced to meet increased employment expectations with less staff due to an earlier legislative workforce reduction. A variety of recommendations to enhance vocational evaluation services resulted from the groups. In regard to serving the increased service needs for customers with severe physical disabilities, the following items were specifically requested in this area:

- Integration of rehabilitation technology into the vocational evaluation process;
- Increased consultation services to field staff by vocational evaluation staff;
- Increased use of computer based assessment tools as well as assessment of technology skills and knowledge; and
- Job analysis and work site assessments.

Technology Services, 1994). Specifically, this process identifies places in the rehabilitation process where use of technology, services, or resources should be considered. It assists vocational evaluators to determine if technology use is appropriate; who should be part of the team, when technology should it be used and what might be expected outcomes. The training was developed into three training modules of three days length each module for a total of nine days. The training was conducted during 1998. Vocational evaluation staff from throughout the state as well as other specialists in the area of rehabilitation technology from within the agency assisted in the development of the content and training objectives. In addition, the Virginia Assistive Technology System (VATS) also provided staff and technical support to the training.

Module 1:

This module was titled "Considering rehabilitation technology early in the rehabilitation process". The objectives of this module were the following:

- To provide a functional understanding of rehabilitation technology (RT) and its components;
- To stimulate thinking towards a paradigm shift to routinely include rehabilitation technology in the vocational evaluation process;
- To increase skills in assessing referral information for customers who may require assistive and rehabilitation technology in vocational evaluations and/or situational assessments; and
- To demonstrate low cost and/or readily available technology that can be used in the assessment process.

Speakers from a variety of rehabilitation specialties offered lectures and "hand-on"

demonstrations centered on the learning objectives listed above. Vocational evaluators were given homework around the topic areas to perform between Module 1 and Module 2.

Module 2:

In Module 2 the focus shifted from primarily a didactic approach to more “hands-on” training. The objectives of this module were the following:

- To increase knowledge of work site modifications;
- To increase knowledge of home site modifications;
- To increase knowledge of driving evaluations as well as wheelchair seating and positioning; and
- To increase knowledge of augmentative communications and assisted listening devices.

These objectives were taught through a variety of learning methods including case studies conducted with training team members such as speech therapists, rehabilitation engineers, occupational therapists and physical therapists. These studies were based on actual cases of persons with disabilities served at W.W.R.C. Vocational evaluators were given the opportunity to work in teams to reach recommendations.

Recommendations were then reviewed by the entire group to discuss approach and the thinking behind suggestions. Actual outcomes were then shared with the training group and reviewed.

On the last day of training, a “wheelchair rodeo” was held to offer participants an

opportunity to experience physical limitations themselves. They were given a variety of tasks to be performed within specific time limits from their wheelchairs. Assistive technology devices were offered to participants to help in accomplishing tasks. This simulation offered participants an opportunity to be creative and to do some critical thinking in regard to their specific situation. These Attributes are of great value when faced with challenging situations.

Module 3:

The final module addressed rehabilitation technology for computer accommodations. The training objective was to teach participants how to load software and to perform simple computer upgrades. Four computers which were surplus from the vocational rehabilitation field offices were sent to W.W.R.C. and used as part of this training exercise. After the training was completed and the computers had received the upgraded software and hardware packages, they were returned to vocational evaluation staff in different parts of the state for immediate use in the vocational assessment process.

On the last day of the training, participants focused on the referrals and service process for each region of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services in regard to requests for rehabilitation technology assessments and assistance. It was determined that the vocational evaluation staff who had received this training would liaison with every field rehabilitation office to review cases on a regularly scheduled basis. Vocational rehabilitation counselors were scheduled to receive a modified form of this training in

1999 and therefore vocational evaluation staff were expected to take the lead in the integration of rehabilitation technology into the vocational rehabilitation process in Virginia.

Administrative Support

Although there were no additional staff positions available to assist with the integration of rehabilitation technology into the vocational assessment process, agency administration did make available other resources to assist in this endeavor. This included the purchase of eight modified computers with enhanced accessibility hardware options as well as software for vocational assessment centers in the field offices. The software included voice recognition and word prediction software as well as voice amplification, internet access, large print software, and screen reader software packages. The hardware included alternate keyboards, track balls to enter data or perform mouse functions, key guards, scanners, and wrist rests.

In addition, \$20,000 was allocated evenly throughout the state to purchase low technology devices for integration into the vocational evaluation process. These purchases included adjustable tables, ergonomic chairs, copy holders, dycem to hold papers in place, as well as reachers and mouthsticks to assist with picking items up. Items with voice output included calculators, levels, clocks and thermometers. Specific orders were developed by the regional vocational evaluation staff who were familiar with the needs of the community and resources that they served.

Discussion

The integration of rehabilitation technology into the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services vocational evaluation services has been an on-going process. It has required changes in agency focus, reallocation of resources, and retraining of agency staff. While many of these changes have been embraced by agency customers and staff, there have been those who have been slower to respond to the integration of these services. These staff have grown to see the benefit of rehabilitation technology as well as the enjoyed in-house assistance in the provision of vocational rehabilitation services for persons with severe disabilities. Training of vocational rehabilitation field counselors is currently underway and will be completed by early 2000. Additional rehabilitation technology devices both low and high tech are now routinely included in budget requests throughout the state. Vocational evaluation staff who received this intensive training meet quarterly with the regional rehabilitation engineer to remain abreast of current technology and research in this area.

Those who have integrated rehabilitation technology into the rehabilitation process has seen improved vocational rehabilitation employment outcomes for persons with severe disabilities. Employers look to their state vocational rehabilitation agency to provide guidance in areas of accommodations and job site modifications. The intensive training and increased resources have enhanced vocational evaluation staff's ability to assist in the employment process for people with disabilities served by the agency.

Where to Get More Information

Additional information on Virginia's integration of rehabilitation technology in the state vocational rehabilitation process is available from the following resources.

Virginia Assistive Technology Services (VATS)
Richmond, Virginia
1-800-435-8490

Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (W.W.R.C.)
Rehabilitation Technology Services
Fishersville, Virginia
1-800-345-9972

References

Center for Rehabilitation Technology Services, South Carolina VR Department (1994). Tech Points: Integrating Rehabilitation Technology into Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute: Menomonie, Wisconsin.

Langton, A., Smith F., Lown, N., Chatham, J., Center for Rehabilitation Technology Services, South Carolina VR Department (1998). Guide to Using Assistive Technology in Assessment and Vocational Evaluation. Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute: Menomonie, Wisconsin.

Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992. PL 102-569. (1992, October 29).
Title U.S.C. et seq: U.S. Statutes at Large.

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