

One Model For Vocational Evaluation

Kyle Vohlken, C.R.C., C.V.E.

Abstract

As the profile of agencies desiring services of a vocational evaluation unit began to change, we found that our services needed to change as well, in order to continue to provide information valuable to our referral sources. This became dramatically clear to use when in the Fall of 1983 President Regan changed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and our business was cut by 60% due to a cut in funding for "Services". To keep the unit afloat, it was necessary to broaden our referral base and to creatively approach new referral sources in the community to see how we might meet the needs of agencies or firms who did not yet realize they "needed" us. One of our first moves was exactly that. We had existed as one part of a traditional not-for-profit rehabilitation facility serving primarily the Developmentally Disabled population. In the past we had been approached by several private insurance companies or rehabilitation firms to provide services, however, never received many referrals. Our crumbling former factory building with an ancient furnace and lack of climate control equipment we realized was part of the problem, along with the community stigma as a place for the significantly visably handicapped individual. After approval was sought and received from our Board of Directors, in January 1984, the Evaluation Unit moved to new office space in the downtown area of our city. To do away with the "rehabilitation center" stigma, we changed our name to The Career Assessment Center, and nowhere on our letterhead or brochures is there a way to connect us with Kandu Industries. Since our move, referrals from insurance companies and private rehabilitation firms have continued to increase. To be more creative, we have been very flexible to shorten the traditional two week evaluation to meet the specific needs of the referral source. We have increased the amount of business we do with the local school systems to include not only the traditional two week evaluation on the Special Ed student, but on others as well by tapping into JTPA dollars targeted for youth. We have done one-day "mini-evaluations" for whole classes of ninth graders, as well as those individuals identified as out of school youth, single parent teens, and other groups the local school system has identified as "special needs" students.

We have also done assessments for local industry. This has been very individualized depending on the information the industry desires, and we have performed these assessments at our location as well as taking our assessment tools "on the road". Our goal is to continue to expand this type of service. As it always has been, our largest referral source is our state Bureau of Rehabilitation - Michigan Rehabilitation Services. We continue to provide one and two week Vocational Evaluations for this agency, and have expanded our services to include being used as the employer of record for On-The-Job Evaluation contracts. Generally, we have found that although advertising has a place in rehabilitation, new referral sources discover us primarily by word of mouth. We make ourselves available to give tours of our facility, as well as holding inservices for interested agencies or businesses describing how we might be of service to them. Another factor in our success has to be that in this relatively close knit community of Holland, Michigan, our parent organization, Kandu Industries, Inc., has existed for 24 years, and the staff of the Career Assessment Center has each been with the agency over 10 years. We have a reputation for providing a consistently high quality service, yet at the same time a dynamic one that is never "canned" and is solely based on the needs of the referral source and the client.

One Model For Vocational Evaluation

As the profile of agencies desiring services of a Vocational Evaluation unit began to change, we found that our services needed to change as well, in order to continue to provide information valuable to our referral sources. We also found that our very existence as a unit depended upon how creative we were in facing this challenge. As an agency, this meant breaking with the "status quo" self-imposed for many years, and expanding our services to include new types of referral sources and new types of services. For staff members it meant personal and professional "stretching", creative thinking, teamwork, and the willingness to take on added duties and responsibilities without immediate financial reward. Our motivation was great: survival of a unit we had watched grow, and jobs in a profession important to our community.

Kandu Industries is located in Holland, Michigan, which is on the Western side of the state, right on Lake Michigan. It is approximately three hours by car north of Chicago and the same distance east of Detroit. It was settled in the mid 1800's by Dutch immigrants, and this fact has had a great impact on the economic profile of this church and family centered community. Because Holland was not established in response to the "industrial revolution", or as a satellite city to Michigan's substantial auto industry, the economy has remained diverse and healthy, providing numerous jobs for the handicapped population.

Kandu Industries was established in 1963 by concerned parents whose developmentally disabled adult children had completed school and lacked day programming. It started as a storefront workshop selling handcrafts and doing small jobs. In the past nearly 25 years it has grown to serving over 200 clients a day with an annual operating budget of about six million dollars. Kandu Industries is a private, non-profit rehabilitation facility serving primarily individuals with developmental disabilities. Aside from a Work Activities program, it provides Sheltered Employment, short term skill training and Placement, and Vocational Evaluation.

The Evaluation unit of Kandu Industries was established in 1973. It began by providing primarily Situational Assessments in the workshop area and eventually added a small amount of psychometric testing. The services expanded along with the Federal Government's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), and many of our early worksample systems were purchased by them for our use with their clients. As our need for staff grew, we were utilized by CETA as a worksite for their Public Service Employees (PSE). In the Evaluation unit we had two or three PSE staff who we trained as evaluation technicians, administering worksamples and recording behavioral observations. Because part of the PSE program included training, we usually had our PSE's participate in Stout's Short Term Training program.

By 1979 we had purchased more equipment and had enjoyed a continued contract with CETA providing us with staff as well as clients who made up about 60% of our business. This relationship lasted for the next four years. Our unit, although growing slowly by the occasional purchase of a new test or worksample, and obtaining a contract to administer the General Aptitude Test Battery, did not "stretch" itself or its employees who basically

enjoyed the status quo. By doing the same thing with the same type of clientele, and working with the same referral counselors for so many years, we became complacent, and probably not very imaginative in developing our evaluation plans and techniques.

We were jolted out of this complacency in 1983, and although fairly traumatic at that time, was probably the best thing that could have happened. In the fall of that year, President Reagan changed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act to the Job Training Partnership Act or JTPA. Due to the cut in funding for participant services, we immediately lost 60% of our business. Staff was laid off, or re-assigned, professional as well as clerical. Suddenly we were left with the Coordinator of Client Services at our facility performing the evaluations with the help of one part time technician who was, if the lab was slow, expected to help out on the workshop floor.

We clearly saw it was time to regroup. Aside from CETA clients, the Evaluation unit had always worked with a steady number of clients from Michigan Rehabilitation Services, our state Vocational Rehabilitation agency. This amounted to between four and six client weeks each month. We had also performed evaluations on referrals from the school system. These were usually Special Education students who did not "fit in" anywhere in the school system, and the majority usually ended up in the Work Activities program at Kandu Industries. Also, we had a very small number of private rehabilitation management firm clients referred to us, about one or two per year, and we had provided tours of our facility and other information to several of the private firms interested in evaluation services. The problem was that with CETA out of the referral picture, these other sources alone did not really provide us with the revenue to warrant an evaluation unit. It was necessary to start broadening our referral base, and marketing our services.

As just mentioned, we occasionally gave tours to private sector rehabilitation counselors who were interested in evaluation services. One firm even requested resumes of the staff which we gladly supplied. We realized the potential was there, but the referrals never came. Our physical plant was probably the biggest obstacle. It was a crumbling red brick factory building dating to the early 1900's. The 20,000 square feet was crammed with Work Activities, Sheltered Employment, short term training, Adult Basic Education classes, an independent living training apartment, the executive offices,

accounting, and the Evaluation Unit. The small, cramped lunchroom served everyone, and even staggered lunch periods did not ease the overcrowding. Offices and classrooms were divided by moveable five foot partitions providing little privacy, not to mention confidentiality. The lack of climate control froze us in the winter and made us swelter in the summer. But the building was not the only problem.

Kandu Industries had been a part of the community for over twenty years. It seemed that no matter how much Public Relations work was done, or how sophisticated our short term training programs and other services were, most people simply could not get past the Developmentally Disabled population. Kandu was clearly a place where the "mentally retarded" worked, and although we held a bi-annual open house, comments such as, "isn't it nice that they have a place to work" and "oh, you actually place these people in jobs?" continued. As a result of this stigma, people sustaining injuries on the job or in car accidents, who were already likely experiencing a lowered self-esteem, probably felt virtually defeated upon being told they would be going to Kandu for an assessment. Many of these clients who stuck it out long enough to realize the staff did not see them in this role commented on their feelings about participating. They felt rehabilitation professionals wanted them to be at Kandu for the rest of their lives, that they were somehow "retarded" since their injury. The low self-esteem and self doubt that often accompanies injury seemed magnified by receiving services from an organization which served the very visably mentally and physically handicapped.

In January 1984, after approval had been sought and received from the Board of Directors, the Evaluation Unit moved to new office space in downtown Holland. To do away with the "workshop" stigma, we changed our name to the Career Assessment Center, and nowhere on our letterhead or brochures is there a way to connect us with Kandu Industries. The building in which we are located provides a very normalizing environment for our clients. It is of course barrier free, and houses a lawyer's office and an HMO, and until this past spring a health food store and a team of manufacturing engineers. Decorated with a maritime motif, and having windows facing north, south, and west, it is a well lit, climate controlled, pleasant environment in which our clients have an opportunity to find out about themselves and their abilities in a very non-threatening way.

We suspected that by removing our services from the traditional rehabilitation facility and offering them in a more normalizing, professional atmosphere, we would increase referrals from the private sector. In 1983, the year

before we moved, we did evaluations on two private sector clients, and six on clients referred from local business. By the middle of 1987, we had already completed ten with two more scheduled.

Another increase which we hadn't expected, came from our local school systems. We had traditionally performed evaluations on the Educable or Trainable Mentally Impaired population, and quite often these students would be placed in our workshop to satisfy their vocational education requirements, and many stayed on after the age of twenty six, or graduation, to become Mental Health sponsored clients. With the advent of the school systems identifying Learning Disabled and "Special Needs" students, as well as the impact of Carl Perkins, we saw an influx of students who were functioning at a higher level than our traditional EMI student. Also, these students had a better chance of success in a Vocational Skill program at the school, once their skills were identified. These were also the students who refused to go to Kandu Industries for an assessment because that was where the "special kids" went. In talking with these students, they usually denied receiving Special Education services, and when filling out an intake form would usually write "none" in the space for disability or handicap. When pressed, they would describe themselves as having "a little problem with reading", or being "a little slow". Clearly, these students did not want to have a Special Education label, and definitely would not attend any program at Kandu Industries.

The Career Assessment Center was the perfect answer for these students. They were allowed to drive to our location themselves, or transportation was provided by the school. They were free to "go downtown" at lunch, and were basically treated as any other adult participant. Typically, they would be at the Career Assessment Center with other adult participants, and almost without exception would maintain very adult like, appropriate behaviors. It is interesting to note that it was the school systems who, while we were making the transition, encouraged us to quickly get our release forms off Kandu letterhead and onto our own.

The services offered at the Career Assessment Center are very flexible. We still primarily provide the traditional one and two week evaluation, and still utilize the workshop of Kandu Industries with its different levels of programming for industrial Situational Assessments. We are careful not to place persons whose goals are competitive employment into the Work Activities area for their Situational.

Assessment. Kandu Industries runs a twelve week training program the goal of which is competitive employment, and this is where most Situational Assessment take place. These one and two week evaluations are used with clients from private insurance companies and rehabilitation management firms, our state vocational rehabilitation agency, and the Special Education department of the schools.

The expansion of our services to the schools, ironically, is their ability to tap into JTPA funds. With the JTPA emphasis on Youth, the local Vocational Education office has secured funds for programs for "special needs" and out of school youth, as well as the traditional economically disadvantaged student. School personnel had found our evaluations of the Special Education population so valuable, that they were looking for a way to do something similar with more students. After some brainstorming between us and the Vocational Education staff, we came up with the one or two day "Mini-Evaluation".

These are performed in a couple of ways. Sometimes the students are scheduled in for one day, and occasionally we can free up a Friday to do two or three students. We get some background information such as interests, school performance, work history, and the like, and talk with the student about their interests. The remainder of the day is "rapid-fire worksamples" with lots of positive feedback. The report focuses primarily on skills and behavioral observations. We charge more than our weekly fee divided by five for this one day because the arrangement is that the reports will be generated in three or four days.

The second way the "Mini-Evaluation" is performed is on entire classes. One of the staff will typically go to the school and administer the Singer Picture Interest Inventory about a week before the evaluations are scheduled. Also, intake forms are dropped off for the teacher to have the students complete, and this is usually done as a class activity. Then, depending on the class size, we will schedule four to six of these students in each day Monday-Thursday, until everyone is completed. This takes a fair amount of pre-arranging because we can't schedule anyone else on these days. We leave Friday open to write up reports and recuperate! Because of the students are JTPA eligible most are on a hot lunch program at the school. We ordered in pizza and Coke for them a few times, which they really liked, and were reimbursed for this.

Many evaluators who have been doing one and two week evaluations for their entire career may question the integrity of "Mini-Evaluations", but in our recommendations we will never hesitate to recommend a full evaluation if our observations of the student warrant this. In most cases when this has been recommended, the school has eventually followed through.

Our relationship with schools has become more positive every year. Frankly, we were somewhat wary of what would happen with the advent of Carl Perkins, and the fact that the schools were beginning to purchase their own assessment tools. We had always made ourselves available to attend Individual Education and Planning Committee meetings (IEPC's) and the like, but started getting slightly more aggressive. If we notice that our schedule is "filling up", we'll place a call to a few Special Education teachers and typically say for example, "March is filling up, is there anyone you'd like to get in before the spring IEPC's?" They usually appreciate the reminder.

We also take the time to attend inservice training for educators, provide inservices to educators about the assessment process, and have occasionally been asked to address parents groups about assessments for their Special Education children. Also, grant monies acquired by the schools usually require an advisory committee made up of community members, and serving on these committees increases our visibility.

In the past couple of years we have slowly developed a relationship with area manufacturers. Most of these began with personal and professional contacts with human service people who advanced their careers to become members of personnel departments. This was quite beneficial since they were already basically aware of the type of services we offered. We have done assessments on site by taking our evaluation equipment "on the road", we have had these clients come to our center for two or three days, and we have also done some consulting work such as job modification recommendations for injured workers. These types of assessments take a lot of flexibility and open mindedness, as the business people with which we've come into contact are not interested in a "canned" program, but want something designed to meet their specific needs. Once a large area manufacturer had several young men in their employ who had all bid on a machine maintenance job. We were asked to come in and assess spatial and

form perception, diagram reading, mechanical aptitude and other critical worker traits for the personnel department to use as one part of the screening process. As a control, they also had in the group a person already employed in that capacity.

When working with area businesses, we like to emphasize that our assessment information be used as just one part of the total screening process. Before we agree to have our data used by a personnel department we discuss the screening procedure with them to make sure that any information we give them will be utilized appropriately. We have also declined to become part of the initial hiring process, and will only perform assessments on those employees looking at higher level jobs.

The staff at the Career Assessment Center basically consists of the Vocational Evaluator and her supervisor, the Director of Client Services. The Director of Client Services is responsible for all client programs at Kandu Industries and so does not have an evaluation caseload. This person is available to "cover" in the evaluator's absence, however, is not really available to assist with the day to day running of the unit. To compensate for this, for the past six or seven years we have used interns from Hope College, a small private liberal arts college in Holland. These students are usually senior sociology, social work, or psychology majors who sign up to do a social work field placement. The Career Assessment Center is used as a site, and we have anywhere from one to three students each semester, six to eight hours a week. These students function primarily as evaluation technicians, administering tests, recording behavioral observations, and addressing housekeeping needs. We have found them enthusiastic, eager to learn, and many become very interested in rehabilitation.

The usual comment is "I didn't know places like this existed!" Having these students work six to eight hours a week frees up time for staffings, dictating, participating in IEPC's and the like. The benefits the students receive include exposure to the human service profession, experience dealing with individuals with a variety of handicapping conditions, and learning specific skills that would be needed in most evaluation units throughout the country. On the downside for us, after training these students, and getting accustomed to having them around, they're gone at the end of the semester. A few have requested another semester with us, and of course, we gladly let them stay. In the six or seven years we have utilized field placement students, we have never had a negative experience, and we look forward to each fall in anticipation of working with these bright, eager students.

Another thing we do with the college would probably fall under the category of public relations work, but again, it is mutually beneficial. Hope College offers degrees in primary and secondary special education. There is a class entitled The Exceptional Child which is a requirement for a student seeking a degree in Special Education. About six years ago, the professor asked us to talk to her class about the services offered at Kandu Industries. This has expanded to include speaking to and touring two classes of about thirty students each every semester, as well as speaking to another class, Special Educational Curriculum and Methods about the place of Vocational Evaluation in Special Education. We take the time and energy to do these things because we really believe it's important for the future Special Education teachers of America to be aware of what a Vocational Evaluation is all about, and it increases our visibility in the Community.

Public relations work has never been something we have approached systematically. Although we have done a minimal amount of "advertising", and it certainly has its place in rehabilitation, we have found that new referral sources discover us primarily by word of mouth. Quite often these are Vocational Rehabilitation counselors who have gone into the private sector, and have recommended us to co-workers. Occasionally, if our business is a little slow, we'll send out letters to the private rehabilitation management firms outlining our services, and basically reminding them of our existence. We also did this recently after purchasing a major piece of evaluation equipment; advising referral sources of our purchase and how we might better serve them and their clients in the future because of this.

The Career Assessment Center does not have "contracts" with other agencies to provide a certain number of evaluation weeks per year, as many evaluation units do. As a result, we depend on our reputation of providing a solid, professional service, in which the client and counselor both benefit. So far, this has worked well for us; we have a steady flow of referrals, maintain the flexibility to be open to something new, and are ready to meet the challenges offered by our community.

AUTHOR:
Kyle "oh11ken
Career Assessment Center
70 West 8th Street
Holland, MI 49423

