

Portfolios: A Tool for Involving Clients in Assessment and Planning  
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Active involvement is a key ingredient of successful career interventions (Szymanski, Hershenson, Ettinger, & Enright, 1996). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and subsequent amendments mandate that consumers be informed, active participants in the rehabilitation process. Portfolios are an excellent means for fostering such involvement with clients. The portfolio is a tool that clients and practitioners can use to integrate multiple sources of information for assessment and planning throughout a person's work life. This paper describes (a) how portfolios can be used in vocational assessment, (b) research evidence of their validity as an assessment tool, and (c) the benefits of using a portfolio as a career management tool in today's diversified labor market.

A career portfolio is a collection of items or samples that demonstrate one's work-related competencies, achievements, values, experiences, and aspirations. It takes the form of a "personalized, sequential career planning journal" (Center on Education and Work, 1995, p. 514) designed to guide decision making and goal setting. Portfolios have been used in the fields of art and industry for years and are currently used in secondary and post-secondary institutions to prepare students for transition to the world of work (Center on Education and Work, 1995; Stemmer, Brown & Smith, 1992; Wircenski & Wircenski, 1994). They have also recently been used with graduate students preparing for careers as rehabilitation counselors (Koch, Schultz, & Cusick, 1998).

The contents and process of developing a portfolio are highly individualized. Generally, portfolios include samples that represent the domains of career exploration and planning (e.g., vocational interest checklists, career decision-making worksheets), training and education (e.g., diplomas, certificates), employment-related experiences (e.g., resumes, lists of previous employers), vocational skills (work samples, transferable skills worksheets, letters of recommendation), and on-going skill development (e.g., professional development plans, continuing education certificates). Portfolio samples document the individual's strengths (rather than weaknesses) and are continuously updated to depict the client's current situation (Koch & Johnston-Rodriguez, 1997).

Portfolios can be introduced to clients during the vocational assessment process as tools to (a) integrate standardized and situational assessment data, (b) learn self-appraisal techniques, (c) expand career options, and (d) identify "gaps" in knowledge or skills that can be remedied through comprehensive rehabilitation planning (Koch & Johnston-Rodriguez, 1997; Koch et al., 1998). A multitude of attributes can be assessed as the client develops his or her portfolio including interests, values, self-perceptions, transferable skills, organizational abilities, and decision-making skills.

Self-assessment is a key ingredient of the portfolio process. It has the advantage of engaging clients in a cognitive process, rather than having them passively receive test scores (Szymanski et al., 1996). Clients can use a variety of tools and methods to gain awareness of their current interests, skills, fears, goals, and other factors that influence work-related decisions. For example, they may (a) use a skills checklist or values card sort, (b) request feedback from people who know them well, (c) complete standardized tests, or (d) participate in trial work experiences. Rehabilitation practitioners can guide clients in this process by helping them to integrate what they learn about themselves with what they learn about potential work opportunities.

Vocational evaluators and rehabilitation counselors are using self-assessment strategies with clients more and more frequently (Rumrill, Koch, & Harris, 1998). Self-definition is beginning to be addressed more from the consumer's perspective than from the counselor's perspective. In the past, methods have relied more heavily on standardized or situational assessment, which emphasize counselor appraisal and interpretation (e.g., Berven, 1984, 1994; Taylor, Bordieri, & Lee, 1993) rather than on self-directed assessment, which emphasizes client appraisal and interpretation. More recently, however, self-assessment has been used in interventions sponsored by rehabilitation research and training centers and other innovative projects (e.g., Bolton & Akridge, 1995; Merz & Szymanski, 1997). It is also a common strategy used by career counselors for the general population.

Studies of self-monitoring (a type of self-assessment) have found that (a) it is generally accurate, (b) accuracy can be increased with training, and (c) it is associated with the cognitive components of vocational maturity (Blustein, 1987; Haynes & Wilson, 1979). Variables that threaten the validity of self-report data include social desirability, reactive influences, culture, and psychological defenses (Ciminero, Calhoun, & Adams, 1986; Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). Comparatively, the more widely used vocational evaluation systems and methods are also lacking in evidence to support their validity (Brown, McDaniel, Couch, & McClanahan, 1994), yet they are routinely used in rehabilitation settings to advise clients on vocational potential.

Given that active involvement is such a critical component of career planning, research is needed to explore the validity of portfolios as a client driven assessment and planning tool in rehabilitation. Encouragingly, initial evidence suggests that portfolios used as part of a career workshop can increase vocational identity and commitment to career choice in VR clients (Merz & Szymanski, 1997). Further research is also needed to explore the impact of portfolios on the client-practitioner relationship, satisfaction with rehabilitation services and employment outcomes, and job retention and career advancement.

In summary, career portfolios are self-assessment tools that actively involve clients in the career assessment and planning process. Not only do they enable clients to discover, develop, and document employability skills, they also enhance self-esteem by focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. Career portfolios also provide an opportunity for clients to express their uniqueness and creativity. Furthermore, they can be used throughout the lifespan to manage future work-related problems and opportunities.

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