

Telecommunications Networking for Vocational Evaluators:
An Innovative Approach to Accessing Evaluation Resources

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Abstract

New personnel entering the profession and newly defined roles for evaluators increase the practitioner's need to remain abreast of the most current information available. By doing so, the services provided to the client are enhanced. This paper focuses on EvalNet, a project designed to provide informational resources and training via a telecommunications network to vocational evaluators working within Rehabilitation Region III. Through computers, evaluation practitioners, especially those in isolated settings, are able to exchange questions, concerns and information pertinent to the profession. In addition, this network links evaluators to an informational data base of current resources, personnel, facilities, assessment tools, computer applications and modification techniques useful in their individual situations. Information is provided on how to become part of the computerized network and ways a similar model can be replicated within other regions.

The expansion of vocational evaluation as a key component to the provision of comprehensive rehabilitation services, has provided a basis for objectively examining the strengths and needs of disabled individuals as they pursue gainful employment. It is important during the evaluation process that practitioners have the opportunity to interact with each other to ensure optimum outcomes and appropriate services for their client population.

The ability to communicate needs and field developments has been hampered by the relative isolation of professionals around the country--severely restricting the professional growth of many evaluators. "Networking devices, both human and technological, are certainly needed because communication among professionals and consumers in rehabilitation is often difficult to achieve." (Backer 1985, p.47)

EvalNet is a telecommunications network developed to provide information and professional training to vocational evaluators within Rehabilitation Region III (Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia). The core of the project is an electronically based information system which will be accessible to an unlimited number of evaluation practitioners from Region III. Using an electronic information network, the project will provide an opportunity for isolated evaluators to obtain related continuing education (CEU) training, share information and resources, and keep up to date on current issues in the field.

Vocational Evaluator Needs

As a developing profession, vocational evaluation has a strong need to insure that specialists operating within the field have an understanding of the fundamentals of the process. "Basic short term programs must continue

to be offered to train evaluators in the vocational evaluation processes, tools, techniques." (Esser, 1985, p. 273) At the same time, the awareness of the isolation and diverse geographical location of evaluators provides a continued challenge for the Rehabilitation Services Administration and professional organizations that serve these professionals. This challenge includes the need to expand inservice delivery systems to encompass other alternatives.

Accessible Training

Training opportunities within the Mid-Atlantic Region have previously been limited to programs offered through the University of Wisconsin at Stout, West Virginia University and George Washington University. While these programs offer quality professional training, they are inadequate to meet the training needs of the vast numbers of evaluators working throughout the region. Analysis of recent conference activities offered through the Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program - George Washington University, suggests that attendance has been limited to individuals in close proximity to the training site. Similar situations have occurred at training programs offered throughout the region and highlight the need to provide training that is accessible to all evaluators. EvalNet can provide these training opportunities without the need for the evaluators to leave their own evaluation setting.

As a certification requirement for vocational evaluation specialists, twelve knowledge and performance areas are required by the Commission on the Certification of Work Adjustment and Vocational Evaluation Specialists (CCWAVES). EvalNet has the potential to facilitate achievement in these core areas through electronically based training.

Interagency Collaboration

Traditionally there has been a lack of effective communication among evaluators working within public schools, post-secondary programs and rehabilitation settings. Evaluators operate across a variety of settings including hospitals, public and private agencies, and business/industry. There

is a strong need to provide information sharing opportunities which cut across the boundaries of these agencies and organizations. EvalNet will decrease duplication of efforts, increase cost-effectiveness and enhance communication across settings on a variety of issues.

The information explosion in rehabilitation often makes it difficult to find the right solution to a given problem due to the abundance of non-relevant information (Backer, 1985, pg. 47). In the needs survey conducted by the George Washington University, 80% of the evaluators polled in Region III indicated that participation in a telecommunications network would be beneficial to them in their current position (Rothacker, 1986). Of the evaluators surveyed, another 80% indicated that they already have access to computers in their evaluation setting. Access to a worksample clearinghouse, available worksample modifications, shared forms and reporting formats, information on current federal legislation and general information sharing were identified as particular benefits of participation in a telecommunications network.

Project Design

EvalNet developed from an idea conceptualized out of numerous discussions among professionals interested in applying computers in vocational evaluation. Though computer applications were being used within many vocational evaluation programs, there have been no coordinated means of accessing information, training, resources and enhancing services for disabled individuals. Utilizing an innovative means of telecommunications technology could provide vocational evaluation practitioners access to this needed information.

Evaluators can enhance their professional skills through information sharing and professional training opportunities via this telecommunications network. The major goals of EvalNet include:

- o Providing an interagency network-based training course via a telecommunications network that will meet the high priority needs of vocational evaluation specialists.

- o Promoting interagency efforts among evaluators working in a variety of settings including: schools, rehabilitation facilities, transition programs, supported work programs, and industry.
- o Providing a forum in which evaluation practitioners, particularly those who are geographically isolated, can share information and resources.

Structure of the Network

EvalNet will exist by means of a host network through which practitioners will be able to electronically link to a wealth of informational resources designed to address regional and national vocational evaluation issues.

Services provided through the network include a bulletin board and electronic mail system. The bulletin board system will provide ongoing up to date information on relevant concerns and issues within the field. The electronic mail system allows individual and group communication. Information is transferred to the intended reader in short message formats similar to traditional methods of business communication.

Components

EvalNet's bulletin board system will enable evaluators to gain information regarding:

- o current and pending legislation on issues affecting individuals with special needs
- o current RFP's available to enhance vocational evaluation services
- o professional employment opportunities in the field
- o available training opportunities
- o reviews of evaluation materials

EvalNet's electronic mail will enable individual and group communication to access the following:

- o the transfer of meeting minutes from professional associations (VEWAA, NAVAE, etc.) to their

membership

- o the potential for practitioners to share forms, systems, processes, reporting formats, local norms, etc.
- o the transfer of client/student information to other professionals
- o geographically isolated practitioners to easily co-author professional articles
- o providing CEU instruction modules

Although many national data base resources exist, there have never been programs dedicated specifically to vocational evaluation issues. Eval Net will allow vocational evaluation practitioners in Rehabilitation Region III to access relevant data base information which has been collected by the George Washington University's Collaborative Vocational Evaluation Training (CVET) and School Based Vocational Evaluation Training (SBET) Programs. The data bases address worksample modifications for individuals of specific disability groups, regional evaluation resources, computer software and hardware applications in vocational evaluation and information on available commercial vocational evaluation products.

Finally, EvalNet will pilot a Continuing Education Unit (CEU) course identified by regional evaluators as highly needed training area and one that addresses a CCWAVES core competency. This course, Worksample Development, will be designed for presentation via a telecommunications network. It will allow course participants to work independently on course requirements, and to communicate with the project instructional staff for feedback and discussion. The course will provide the necessary contact hours to gain credit toward certification maintenance.

Participants will develop a useful product upon completion of the training and will also receive the necessary contact hours to earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs). This course will serve as a pilot for future training sessions offered through this medium.

Model Replication

Evaluators throughout the region will receive training in the use of EvalNet. Participants will receive instruction in the use of the network, written resource materials, and on-going technical consultation. Support and assistance will be provided to evaluators from other regions for integration into the telecommunications network, once EvalNet is operational. This project will serve as a model for replication within other regions throughout the country. EvalNet will have the potential to expand to a national network addressing global concerns within the field with regional satellite programs to address local concerns.

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