

**Variety is the Spice of Life:
Working Toward Avoiding Burnout
in the Vocational Assessment Setting**

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Abstract

Vocational Evaluators within the school based setting face several challenges, including maintaining and attracting a sufficient client base and effectively utilizing resources. Avoiding burnout, which can result from working with a non-diverse consumer population and performing routine, repetitive tasks, is an ongoing challenge. Vocational Evaluators at the Monroe #1 BOCES Vocational Assessment Center have worked to address these issues via adopting a flexible "menu" of assessment packages, attracting a diversified adult consumer population and developing collegial relationships.

Introduction

The primary function of public school based Vocational Evaluators is to provide information that can be used to help the student consumer determine an appropriate vocational path. The school aged population includes students with mild to severe mental retardation, mild to severe learning disabilities, and emotional, physical and sensory impairments to learning. Often, a disproportionately large number of students fall under one of these categories. School based Vocational Evaluators work as consultants, providing information to guidance counselors, special education teachers, transition specialists, social workers and school administrators.

The organizational constraints of working with special education students present several challenges for Vocational Evaluators. Fiscal responsibilities and sometimes inadequate support from referring school personnel present difficulties. Evaluators must often justify their presence in the school system by maintaining sufficient utilization of their facilities. And when they are successful in "bringing in business," the work load increases. As Evaluators spend more time interacting with consumers, the increased paperwork and reduced time available for report writing become sources of stress. It is often the case that student consumers are reluctant participants who are not invested in the testing process. Limited positive feedback or no feedback at all regarding assessment reports and/or student outcomes can make it seem as though the Evaluator's work has no impact or significance. And perhaps most significantly, working with a non-diverse student population and performing tasks of a routine, repetitive nature can lead to tedium. These and other related factors present school based Vocational Evaluators with an ongoing challenge: avoiding burnout.

Burnout can most simply be defined as "an emotionally depleted state experienced by people in the helping professions" (Schaufeli, Maslach & Marek, 1993). It can more specifically be described as the development of negative feelings and attitudes towards the self and other people within the workplace. Its detrimental effects include low moral, absenteeism, tardiness and high job turnover (Pines & Aronson, 1988). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI: Maslach & Jackson, 1981) provides a model in which three clusters of symptoms define the concept of burnout. These are: exhaustion and lack of enthusiasm; depersonalization and emotional detachment; and reduced personal accomplishment.

Research and discussion on burnout has pointed to a number of causes in the human service field in general. Organizational constraints and demands (Cherniss, 1991), perceived lack of autonomy (Arches, 1991), powerlessness and isolation (Powell, 1994), and tedium (Cherniss, 1991) are all identified as causes of burnout. As practitioners we ask, "What can be done in the vocational assessment setting to mitigate these forces?"

Discussion

Vocational Evaluators employed in a public school setting in Upstate New York have been working to improve their vocational assessment program and the services they provide to students and adults over the past fourteen years.

The Vocational Assessment program was first offered as a standard, ten half day vocational evaluation provided to students participating in educational programs through the Monroe #1 Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in Fairport, New York. This service was offered via a department which is now known as Career Planning Services (CPS), with services initially funded via a grant. The first major changes in assessment services were driven by student need (for a shorter assessment period), and financial challenges, (the need for a "fee for service" policy in anticipation of the end of start-up grant funding). A "menu" of assessment packages was developed, so that referring parties could easily identify the goal of the assessment, fee for the service requested, and length of the assessment period. Time frames ranged from one to five half days. These changes led to greater diversity in the assessment program's consumer population, as students participating in mainstream educational courses could more readily participate in vocational testing.

The next major change in the assessment program was the addition of adult consumers. Vocational Evaluators who had previously worked in rehabilitation settings were approached by Rehabilitation Counselors from what is now known as Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID), the New York State adult vocational rehabilitation service provider. A contract was developed, delineating assessment packages, fees, and billing procedures. This further diversification of consumers led to more variety in the Vocational Evaluators' work in terms of interpersonal interaction (with professionals and consumers) instruments used, and knowledge base utilized (due to differing disabilities represented). It also helped to address the challenge of filling assessment time not used due to the students' school calendar (e.g. exam weeks, opening week of school). Vocational Evaluators found themselves working with consumers who were more invested in the process, and who were interested in receiving and giving feedback regarding testing outcomes.

In 1996, another major addition to the assessment consumer base came with the awarding of a contract for Initial Evaluation Services by the Veterans Administration. CPS assessment staff have had the opportunity to broaden their use of interviewing, testing, and writing skills in working with disabled veterans. In addition, by working with a new consumer population, Vocational Evaluators have also been able to establish new contacts with area rehabilitation professionals and to improve and expand their knowledge of community resources.

The diversity of consumers and referring parties also leads to the potential for greater autonomy and control, important factors mentioned by Cherniss (1991). Vocational Evaluators have the opportunity to vary the amount of time spent with individuals of different ages, abilities, and experiences. The variation in consumers also leads to diversity in report writing as well. Report writing can be a particularly tedious task for the vocational Evaluator.

Kruger, Bernstein, & Botman (1995) study and discuss the effects of friendship and peer cohesion on burnout. Their study suggests that "reciprocal relationships may help team members avoid burnout," while indicating that causal relationships must be tested in future studies (p. 198). Another researcher finds that signs of alienation, such as powerlessness and isolation, were significantly correlated with burnout (Powell, 1994). CPS vocational assessment staff speculate that the professional support and friendship that has developed among co-workers and colleagues has assisted in reducing feelings of isolation and thus burnout. This is true of the smaller assessment center staff, and the larger CPS staff. Over a fourteen year period the three members of the assessment center staff have developed friendships which go beyond professional boundaries. Members of the larger CPS staff interact and have established both collegial and friendship bonds. They meet on a regular basis on a casual level (e.g. informal lunch groups), as part of department Shared Decision Making Committee, and for discussions of individual students who receive services from multiple department members.

Summary

Vocational Evaluators who spend their time within the confines of one room have been able to avoid some of the tedium and predictability of a long term career by increasing the variety which comes through their door. And with varied consumers comes interaction with a wealth of rehabilitation and school professionals, family members and other community contacts. Through diversification, Vocational Evaluators are able to modify organizational constraints with respect to the more effective use of time and resources. Access to additional sources of funding is an added benefit. Developing and enhancing collegial relationships is another method of reducing stress and avoiding burnout.

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