

Building Employment Readiness

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Background

As concerns about accountability for public funds increase, career and employment service agencies face increasing pressure to demonstrate return on investment for funds spent on client interventions. This dynamic translates into efforts to maximize clients' employment success while minimizing the interventions delivered. Until recently, there have been no national objective data on what assistance is actually needed by clients and the types of interventions that are most effective.

In order to ensure client success, it is important to focus on the factors that have proven to be critical to success in the world of work. Employment readiness can be defined as being able, with little or no outside help, to find, acquire, and keep an appropriate job as well as being able to manage transitions to new jobs as needed (Ward and Riddle, 2002). Research has validated nine factors as being key to becoming employment ready (Ward and Riddle, 2001, 2003):

- Employability Dimensions: career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search, job maintenance, ongoing career management
- Supports (to manage challenges): self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, social supports, work history

These nine factors can be measured in a valid and reliable manner, including change over time, by the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS). Data from the ERS have been used to determine how best to work effectively with clients in building employment readiness, with particular attention to those clients facing multiple barriers to work life success.

How Much Assistance Clients Actually Need

An increasing number of career and employment service agencies in Canada are being funded to focus primarily on Job Search. Data from the first 28,774 Canadian clients to take the ERS over the past five years show that only 15% of those were ready for Job Search assistance when they first took the ERS. At least 24% of clients taking the ERS needed help in at least one other area of employment readiness in order to benefit from a job search intervention. More importantly, 61% of all clients using the services of agencies licensed to use the ERS scored as “Not Ready” at the point of intake. Not Ready means that they need help with at least two Supports and three Employability Dimensions before being ready for independent job search – i.e., a significant degree of assistance. Without that help, they would have only a 40% chance of successfully getting and keeping a job (Ward and Riddle, 2001).

In examining the group of Not Ready clients, one can see that they vary by age and employment equity group. Of persons with disabilities, over 71% scored as Not Ready. Youth had 66% who scored as Not Ready, women had 62% Not Ready, Aboriginal persons showed 58% Not Ready, and visible minorities and older workers each had 57% who were Not Ready.

Addressing only Job Search skills for Not Ready clients could be a waste of public funds as, by itself, Job Search assistance will not move Not Ready clients to employment readiness. By contrast, addressing the full range of factors needed to ensure that Not Ready clients become employment ready can increase their chances of work success by more than 50% (Ward, Riddle, and Lloyd, 2004).

The Types of Assistance Clients Need

While it is common to think of only certain clients as having barriers, data from the ERS indicate that on average 67% of clients already ready for independent job search still have significant barriers – measured as Challenges by the ERS – that they need to manage (Ward and Riddle, 2005). Of the Not Ready clients, 79% reported a significant number of environmental challenges – i.e., responsibilities that could interfere with their work commitments (see the data in Table 1) – while only 46% reported systemic challenges – i.e., issues that were beyond their control to change. These data document the fact that the majority of barriers clients need to manage are, in fact, within their own control if they are properly prepared to address them. The most commonly reported challenge was the need for more education (65%), followed by the need for financial assistance (55%). Child care assistance was also of concern, with 40% reporting that they were the primary caretakers for minor children.

Table 1: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Needing Assistance by Factor

ERS Factor	Aborigi- nals	Persons with Disabilities	Visible Minorities	Women	Youth	Older Workers
<i>Employability Dimensions:</i>						
Ongoing career mgmt.	89	87	87	90	91	86
Job search	89	88	88	89	87	86
Career decision-making	67	73	67	70	69	70
Skills enhancement	71	76	71	71	65	73
Job maintenance	45	58	47	43	44	48
<i>Supports:</i>						
Work history	71	67	69	67	75	60
Social supports	53	64	68	59	53	72
Self-efficacy	62	70	63	60	61	58
Outcome expectance	35	45	40	36	31	37
<i>Challenges:</i>						
Environmental	92	89	89	86	86	79
Personal	83	94	80	80	80	77
Systemic	56	58	61	47	52	46

Among the Not Ready clients, Aboriginal persons on average were most likely to report environmental challenges (92%), while persons with disabilities were most likely to report

personal challenges (94%). Visible minorities were the most likely to report systemic challenges (61%), perhaps related to the discrimination they may face when seeking employment.

Given the number of clients reporting significant Challenges that could interfere with their success at work, assistance with becoming strong on Supports is particularly important. Research has shown that, if clients are strong on all four Supports, they are able to deal effectively with the Challenges they face without compromising employment success (Ward and Riddle, 2001).

The Support with which the most Not Ready clients (69%) needed help was Work History. Not surprisingly, youth were the most likely to need help (75%), followed by Aboriginal persons (71%). Interestingly, 60% of the Not Ready older workers also scored low on Work History. When clients score low on Work History, they are indicating that they have not yet had a successful experience in the world of work – whether paid or volunteer. Job coaching, apprenticeships, internships, and well supervised work/study programs can all help provide a closely supervised or coached work experience so that they believe it is possible to be successful.

Social Supports, or knowing where to turn for help, is an area where 64% of Not Ready clients showed a need for assistance. It is interesting to note that 72% of older workers indicated a need for assistance with this factor, along with 68% of visible minorities and 64% of persons with disabilities. If agencies are aware of clients' need to strengthen Social Supports, this factor can be addressed during all interventions by structuring any group session in such a manner that clients build networks among themselves and share useful community resources.

Regarding Self-Efficacy, or the sense of being able to perform well and manage one's life effectively, persons with disabilities were most likely to need assistance (70%), followed by visible minorities (63%) and Aboriginal persons (62%). It is relevant to note, though, that 71% of Aboriginals with disabilities reported needing assistance with Self-Efficacy. Persons with disabilities (45%) were also the most likely to need help with Outcome Expectancy, or being optimistic about work possibilities. Both of these factors can be addressed during other interventions by encouraging clients to share their successes and then giving them recognition for the strengths reflected in those successes.

Turning to the Employability Dimensions, not surprisingly the biggest issues for Not Ready clients were Ongoing Career Management and Job Search, with 89% and 88% respectively of clients needing assistance. Ongoing Career Management may not seem that important to persons looking for an immediate job, but it is the factor that will help keep persons from cycling back onto income assistance (Riddle and Ward, 2000). While the client subgroups were fairly uniform in their responses on some factors, Job Maintenance is a good example of an area of difference – with 58% of Not Ready persons with disabilities needing assistance as compared with 46% of all Not Ready clients. Aboriginals with disabilities were particularly likely to need assistance with Job Maintenance (60%).

How Effective Interventions Are in Addressing Client Needs

For the 3,114 Not Ready Canadian clients who retook the ERS after receiving assistance, the most improvement shown was in Career Decision-Making where 69% of the Not Ready clients needing assistance shifted from not self-sufficient to self-sufficient. Over 53% of those needing assistance with Job Search and 53% of those needing help with Social Supports also improved. Unfortunately, there is not necessarily a good relationship between the percent of

clients needing help on a particular factor and the percent of improvement seen. The list below ranks the factors in order of clients needing assistance and then provides the percent of those clients who did show improvement from the interventions they received:

- Ongoing career management (49.4%)
- Job Search (53.4%)
- Career decision-making (68.6%)
- Work History (34.8%)
- Skills Enhancement (44.9%)
- Social Supports (53.1%)
- Self-Efficacy (41.3%)
- Job Maintenance (50.0%)
- Outcome Expectancy (50.0%)

These data indicate that less than half of the clients needing assistance with the lead factor – Ongoing Career Management – actually improved on that factor based on the help they received. The least improvement was shown on the fourth most important factor – Work History – on which 69% of the client scored as needing assistance but less than 35% of those improved. So, while clients are clearly improving due to interventions, that improvement is not necessarily in the areas where the majority of clients need help.

Table 2: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Who Improved, by Intervention Type

ERS Factor	Aborig- inals	Persons with Disabilities	Visible Minorities	Women	Youth	Older Workers
<i>All Interventions:</i>						
Career decision-making	44	47	46	49	47	53
Job search	42	41	44	49	47	47
Social supports	28	27	38	34	28	38
Job maintenance	26	24	26	21	23	23
Outcome expectancy	22	19	21	18	17	17
Ongoing career mgmt.	45	36	46	46	44	44
Skills enhancement	32	28	31	34	34	29
Self-efficacy	28	22	30	26	27	23
Work history	28	18	31	24	25	23
<i>Life Skills Interventions:</i>						
Ongoing career mgmt.	34	na	48	36	na	na
Self-efficacy	27	na	41	39	na	na
Social supports	22	na	37	27	na	na
Career decision-making	35	na	46	33	na	na
Job search	33	na	49	31	na	na
Work history	27	na	48	29	na	na
<i>Career Exploration Interventions:</i>						
Career decision-making	na	62	46	57	66	48
Ongoing career mgmt.	na	42	58	44	35	33
Job search	na	39	56	43	52	35
Social supports	na	31	44	36	32	30
<i>Job Search Interventions:</i>						
Job search	34	47	54	53	52	48
Ongoing career mgmt.	24	39	46	40	45	35
Career decision-making	25	45	28	40	42	37
Social supports	28	33	37	32	35	34

na = data not available

When one looks at different client groups, it is apparent that the greatest benefit has been to older workers regarding interventions assisting them with career decision-making, as 53% shifted from not self-sufficient to self-sufficient. Older workers also improved on Social Supports, with 38% changing from weak to strong. Visible minorities also showed relatively good improvement in Social Supports (38% change) and Self-Efficacy (30% change). By contrast, persons with disabilities showed only modest gains in three of the factors where they needed particular assistance: Social Supports (27% change), Self-Efficacy (22% change), and Job Maintenance (24% change). Work History is the factor that showed the most disappointing results given its importance for client success. While 45% of visible minorities needing assistance showed improvement, only 27% of similar persons with disabilities improved.

To be most effective, interventions need to be sequenced appropriately. Experience, using data from the ERS, has shown that there is a three-tier sequence that works particularly well (Ward and Riddle, 2005):

a) Foundational skills

- Self-efficiency
- Outcome expectancy
- Social supports

b) Employability skills

- Career decision-making
- Skills enhancement
- Job maintenance
- Ongoing career management

c) Job acquisition

- Job search skills
- Work history

Data from interventions in each of the three categories were examined to determine how effective the type of intervention was on average in helping clients become employment ready. Life Skills workshops typically target the foundational skills such as Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectancy as well as the soft skills of Job Maintenance. Data in Table 2 show that the lead factor affected by Life Skills workshops was Ongoing Career Management rather than Self-Efficacy, which ranked second. As Ongoing Career Management is the factor with which the most clients need assistance, this result is of overall benefit. But the data indicate that, on average, Life Skills workshops are having relatively little impact (21% change) on Outcome Expectancy, which is an important component of motivation, or on Job Maintenance (24%

change). Further, Aboriginal persons appeared to have benefited less from Life Skills interventions with regard to Self-Efficacy as compared with the other client subgroups, while visible minorities appear to have benefited more.

Career Exploration interventions are designed to target employability skills. As expected, the leading factor of improvement from Career Exploration interventions was Career Decision-Making (53%), followed by Ongoing Career Management (40%). However, clients also showed notable improvement in Job Search skills and Social Support networks. Persons with disabilities showed particular improvement in Career Decision-Making, while visible minorities improved significantly in Ongoing Career Management, Job Search , and Social Support networks.

Not surprisingly, Job Search interventions produced client improvement primarily in Job Search skills (51%). Again, however, clients showed improvement in related areas – Ongoing Career Management (38%) and Career Decision-Making (37%) – as well as in the development of Social Support networks (33%). While persons with disabilities benefited particularly in Career Decision-Making, Aboriginal clients consistently showed less change than other client groups as a result of Job Search interventions. The findings on Job Search interventions are particularly critical as this is often the only type of intervention available to clients. Note that such interventions typically produce no significant improvement in either Work History or Self-Efficacy where well over half of Not Ready clients need assistance.

Conclusion

The rich data generated through the ERS offers valuable insight into the dynamics of Canadians in work transition. Most notably, the assumption that job search assistance alone is sufficient to equip the majority of unemployed Canadians for successful work transition is clearly

contradicted by the data at hand. In recent years, the focus on reducing the investment in programs and services – and the assumption that making employment-related information and resource centres available will address the needs of the majority – can be called into question, based on these data. We can assume that governments and other funders of employment services are well-intentioned in focusing on reducing the investment of public funds. However, it is important to consider the costs of clients seeking work before they are truly employment ready. The risks are significant, whether in the form of prolonged unemployment due to unaddressed needs, failing to retain work due to a lack of relevant skills or effective work habits, or individuals repeatedly cycling back onto public assistance. Such scenarios are costly to society, employers, and individuals.

The good news is that the data show that delivering appropriate interventions linked to client needs can have a demonstrated and significant impact on employment readiness. As further data are acquired and analyzed, there will be an opportunity to further refine our understanding of the needs of clients and the effectiveness of interventions for specific populations. It will thus be possible to raise our ability to assist all groups of Canadians in building effective work lives and contributing to the prosperity of their families, communities, and our economy as a whole.

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