

Defining and Measuring Employment Readiness¹

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Abstract

With the increasing emphasis on efficient use of resources and a more fluid labour market, how can you best help clients prepare for successful employment and satisfy your funders that you are effective? The Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) provides a state-of-the art online tool for helping clients quickly identify their strengths and challenges, track their progress in becoming more self-sufficient, and verify when they are “employment ready.” Validated through three years of field testing and used by over 20,000 clients in Canada, the ERS can predict successful employment four out of five times. The ERS also allows agencies to evaluate programs (as it is validated for repeat administration) by having clients take it before and after interventions and thereby demonstrate to funders the effectiveness of their interventions.

Background

Those involved in assisting youth and adults to make effective work transitions are under increasing pressure to make efficient use of resources and to demonstrate the impact of the programs and services they provide. At the same time, governments and other organizations that pay for programs and services to assist with such transitions are increasingly expected to show evidence that their dollars have been wisely spent in helping people to become employed and reducing reliance on income support.

Effective delivery of employment programs and services begins with an accurate determination of an individual’s employment readiness, followed by the development and implementation of an action plan to address areas where they are not “employment ready.” Once that action plan has been carried out, it is important to have a way of knowing whether or not the client is employment ready. Frequently, the answer is inferred from the answers to two other questions: “Did they get a job?” or “Did they go on a training program?” Unfortunately, such results really do not tell us “what works” to help ensure an effective transition and, secondly, these outcomes

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are, at best, a very imprecise measure of intervention effectiveness. If the individual does not find employment, is that due to limited vacancies, insufficient search effort, or the fact that they are not yet ready for independent job search? If they do not succeed in training, does that reflect a poor training choice for that individual, limited effort, or a poor quality training program? These are tough questions to answer and reflect measurement challenges that have long been a concern in the employment service field.

Defining Employment Readiness

Although the concepts of employability and employment readiness may seem straightforward, their specification for measurement purposes is complex. Over the past ten years, there has been a gradual shift from a more static concept of having completed certain prerequisite steps to a more dynamic one of the ability to “recognize and adapt to continuous change” (Ellig 1998). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has begun emphasizing the need for lifelong learning in order to maintain employability (McKenzie and Wurzburg 1998). In Canada, the Blueprint for Life/Work Designs developed by the National Life/Work Centre (Haché et al 1998) frames career development and employability as multidimensional.

Previous work by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) identified four employability factors – career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search, and job maintenance – which have been the foundation for its employment counselling measurement model (Busque 1995; Rosove 1982). The first three factors in particular have been validated by a range of international research as being at the core of employability. With the increasing volatility in the labour market, a fifth employability factor has emerged as important – ongoing career management (Riddle 1998, 1999, 2000).

Focusing only on employability ignores the context in which work-related behaviour takes place. One aspect of that context, recognized initially in the original HRDC model, is barriers to employment. While acknowledged as important, these barriers are difficult to quantify and measure. Some researchers have explored barriers as a source of stress, which over time can interfere with optimal performance (Cohen, Karmarck, and Mermelstein 1983).

The other aspect is the personal resources that an individual brings to the work context in order to manage those barriers or challenges. Talked about loosely as “motivation,” these too have remained elusive from a measurement perspective. Recent work in the Adaptive Success Identity Plan (ASIP) project (Solberg et al 1998) has disaggregated motivation into self-efficacy – i.e., the belief in one’s ability to perform well – and outcome expectancy, or the belief that performing well will result in the desired outcome (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Bandura 1992, 1997). The ASIP approach makes a direct link between self-efficacy and stress management (Cohen et al 1983; Cohen and Wills 1985; Jerusalem and Schwarzer 1992). Indeed, Luzzo and Hutcheson (1996) found that accurate identification of barriers could be a stimulus to careful planning.

Measuring Employment Readiness

Based on the research summarized briefly above, the senior authors developed a model of employment readiness using the following definition: “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.” The Employment Readiness Scale (ERS) model is based on the assumption that, to be “employment ready,” clients need to have achieved three goals:

Goal #1 – Become self-sufficient in five employability skill areas:

- Career decision-making
Knowing what kind of work one wants to do, verifying that there is some demand for that kind of work, and having a goal for making it happen.
- Skills enhancement
Having the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to perform the kind of work one wants to do.
- Job search
Having the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and resources needed to be successful in finding the kind of work one wants.
- Job maintenance
Being able to succeed at work and maintain a job once one finds it.
- Ongoing career management
Continuing to learn and planning ahead to handle career changes effectively.

Goal #2 – Understand the particular stresses or challenges they face:

- Personal, which clients can address individually
- Environmental, which clients can manage with help
- Systemic, which clients need strategies to overcome

Goal #3 – Cope effectively with the stresses or challenges they face, drawing on four sources of strength:

- Self-efficacy, or a sense of being able to perform well
- Outcome expectancy, or whether or not a client expects to succeed
- Social supports, or the client’s network and ability to get help
- Work history, or the client’s previous work success

Research has shown that just being self-sufficient in the five employability skills is not enough (Ward and Riddle 1999, 2001, 2003). Most clients face a number of barriers or challenges that act as stressors and can be incapacitating if not managed well. Clients who face significant challenges without assistance in handling them are likely to have difficulty in maintaining work even if they are successful in getting a job. So all three parts of the employment readiness model are equally important.

In order to measure employment readiness as defined by the model, scale items were developed based on previously validated instruments plus interviews with experts on employability and job/work readiness. Over a period of three years the Employment Readiness Scale™ was field tested with 758 participants who were on either employment insurance or income assistance. The sample distribution appears in Table 1.

Table 1
Field Test Client Characteristics

Client Variable	Percent of Field Test Sample
Aboriginal persons	6.5%
Persons with disabilities	11.3%
Visible minorities	27.6%
Women	47.5%
Age: 18-25 years old	20.3%
26-45 years old	55.4%
46-65 years old	24.3%
Intervention status*:	
Pre-employability	3.4%
Transition program	7.4%
Starting an intervention	56.4%
Ending an intervention	17.2%
Looking for work**	15.6%

*The percentages for Intervention Status are based on the 626 participants in the first two field tests.

**In addition, the 132 participants in the third field test were looking for work.

The results of the field testing showed that the five employability dimensions (Career Decision-Making, Skills Enhancement, Job Search, Job Maintenance, and Ongoing Career Management), the challenges faced by clients, and all four of the “supports” (Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, Social Supports, and Work History) were being measured by the ERS in a manner that showed internal reliability, construct validity, concurrent validity, and predictive validity. Selected findings included the follows:

- a) The factor reliability coefficients and item-total correlations were significant for all factors.
- b) Client self-ratings on the five employability dimensions, four supports, and challenges were significantly related to staff ratings of client self-sufficiency on those dimensions.
- c) Client scores on the ERS were able to correctly predict 79.2 percent of the clients who became employed within 12 weeks of taking the ERS, thus validating the predictive ability of the ERS.
- d) Persons who were self-sufficient on all five employability dimensions were the most likely to be employed within 12 weeks.
- e) High client scores on job maintenance and social supports in particular more than doubled clients’ chances of being employed within 12 weeks, raising the potential importance of providing life skills training for clients prior to job search.

Based on these results, an Internet-based tool called *The Employment Readiness Scale*[™] (ERS) was developed, along with its French counterpart, *l'Échelle d'employabilité*[™]. Since the ERS had been designed to reliably measure changes in employment readiness over time, the web-based version was programmed so that an individual could take the ERS up to three times with a single access code and the results of the various administrations could be compared.

Using the Employment Readiness Scale[™]: Sample Applications

Because the ERS measures a range of factors related to employment readiness and can be administered more than once for pre-post measures, it can be used in a number of ways. In working with individual clients, the ERS can be used:

- a) At initial intake in order to gain information to use for intervention planning with a client.
- b) To educate clients about employment readiness through their Feedback Report.
- c) To provide clients with a detailed “map” of what they need to work on in order to become employment ready, and help them outline the specific steps they will take using the Action Plan function.
- d) After an intervention to see if the client benefited from the intervention.
- e) When a staff member believes a client to be “job ready” in order to verify that assessment.

In addition to the benefits for individuals, the ERS offers professional staff (e.g., career educators, case managers and other employment service providers) a tool that:

- a) Complements initial assessment interviews with detailed information on the individual’s readiness.
- b) Documents the extent of assistance required for purposes of planning with individuals.
- c) Identifies appropriate program and service options for individuals.
- d) Documents progress towards employment readiness from programs offered
- e) Supports program planning by detailing the needs of the client population.
- f) Assesses the relative effectiveness of different employability-related programs.
- g) Provides aggregated reports that can be submitted to funders for accountability reporting.
- h) Helps in referring clients to appropriate programs by listing those with particular needs.
- i) Provides objective verification of the effectiveness of agency interventions.

At the aggregate level, the ERS can provide funders with roll-up reports that:

- a) Document aggregate client needs by labour market area.
- b) Document the outcomes being achieved by funded programs.
- c) Measure the effectiveness of program funding and intervention types.
- d) Compare the effectiveness of programs in different labour market areas.

Findings from the Employment Readiness Scale™

To date, the ERS has been administered to over 20,000 clients in Canada, over 500 clients in the U.S., and over 600 clients in Hong Kong (China). Analysis of the data from the first 19,708 Canadian clients indicated the following:

a) The majority of clients have more than job search issues

Of the 19,708 clients taking the ERS prior to interventions, only 16 percent of clients tested indicated that they were already “fully ready” to benefit from job placement and equipped to retain a new job. By contrast, 62 percent were “not ready”, meaning that they had at least three employment readiness factors on which they needed assistance in order to become successfully employed. Of those “not ready” clients, over 70 percent needed assistance on four of the five employability dimensions and over 60 percent needed assistance on three of the four supports (see Table 2). These data indicate that successful employment assistance programs need to address a range of employability issues beyond job search, including ongoing career management, career decision-making, skills enhancement, work history, social supports, and self-efficacy.

Table 2: Percent of Clients Who Need Assistance
(n = 19,708)

Employment Readiness Factor	Percent of Clients Who Need Assistance		
	All Clients	“Minimally Ready”	“Not Ready”
<i>Employability Dimension</i>			
Ongoing career management	63%	31%	89%
Job search	60%	24%	88%
Skills enhancement	48%	16%	71%
Career decision-making	46%	9%	71%
Job maintenance	30%	2%	47%
<i>Supports</i>			
Work history	51%	33%	70%
Social supports	46%	29%	64%
Self-efficacy	42%	14%	63%
Outcome expectancy	25%	8%	36%
<i>Challenges</i>			
Environmental	80%	76%	85%
Personal	70%	61%	79%
Systemic	40%	44%	46%

Key:

“Minimally ready” – needs assistance with only one or two employment readiness factors

“Not ready” – needs assistance with three or more employment readiness factors

b) Addressing multiple employment readiness factors pays off

Clients who tested “not ready” had a 72 percent successful placement rate within 12 weeks, while clients who tested “minimally ready” (i.e., just needing

assistance with job search) had a 96 percent successful placement rate. These data indicate that, in the long run, it is cost effective to invest the time and resources in helping clients address employment readiness factors other than simply job search skills.

c) Current programs do affect more than job search skills

For the 3,563 clients who took the ERS both before and after interventions, the post-intervention results showed over 50 percent improvement on five of the factors (see Table 3). Not surprisingly, the factor on which clients showed the most improvement was job search skills, as 73 percent of the clients needed assistance with job search and job search was a primary focus of most interventions. Other factors showing significant improvement included ongoing career management, career decision-making, skills enhancement, and social supports. The improvement in career decision-making was particularly heartening to see as, without a career focus, it is difficult for clients to sustain the effort to learn new skills and the accommodate to the demands of a new employer.

Table 3: Percent of Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient
(n = 3,563)

Employment Readiness Factor	Percent Self-Sufficient		Percent Increase in Self-Sufficiency
	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	
<i>Employability Dimension</i>			
Job search	27%	62%	129.6%
Ongoing career management	30%	60%	100.0%
Career decision-making	43%	74%	72.1%
Skills enhancement	42%	64%	52.4%
Job maintenance	61%	75%	23.0%
<i>Supports</i>			
Social supports	47%	71%	51.1%
Work history	43%	59%	37.2%
Self-efficacy	51%	69%	35.3%
Outcome expectancy	68%	78%	14.7%

d) All clients need help with challenges or responsibilities

The top five challenges reported by clients were believing that they didn't have enough education (63%), believing that they did not have enough money to survive without assistance (56%), having responsibility to care for dependent children (40%), not having the proper clothes for work (39%), and not having the proper tools and assistive devices for work (38%). These statistics suggest that, if clients were to obtain employment, their ability to maintain that employment could be compromised by inability to access affordable childcare or from a lack of proper work supports.

Data in Table 2 indicate that 80 percent of clients reported that they had significant environmental challenges – i.e., responsibilities such as child care that could interfere with their work responsibilities. Even for “fully ready” clients, 68 percent indicated that they had significant environmental challenges. Persons with disabilities, in particular, indicated personal challenges with which they needed assistance – e.g., lack of necessary education, health problems, etc. Information on the challenges faced by clients is critical for governments in making informed policy decisions.

e) Even older workers need supervised work experience

One of the key predictors of success in work life is previous work experience. While 62 percent of persons under 25 years of age reported that they had not yet had a successful work experience, surprisingly 43 percent of workers over the age of 45 also reported the same thing. Of particular concern regarding older workers is the 51 percent who indicated that they did not have a social network to support them in their work life and finding a new job. Under present programs administered by agencies using the ERS for post-intervention testing, only 16 percent of clients improved their experience with work. These data indicate that relevant authorities may find that apprenticeship programs, job coach programs, internships, and other programs providing extra supervision were a good investment of public funds.

f) Ongoing career management skills can prevent cycling back onto assistance

Most clients are not concerned with issues beyond getting a job; however, 63 percent of them demonstrated that they did not have the skills to manage transitions between jobs (see Table 2). Since most persons are likely to have at least six different types of jobs or careers, an inability to manage transitions (i.e., ongoing career management skills) can mean a high probability of cycling back onto public assistance.

Conclusions

The absence of effective measures of employment readiness in career education, counselling and employment service settings has meant a lack of benchmarks or feedback for program planning and evaluation. Rather than relying on “best guesses”, we need valid objective data to determine what makes a difference to the employment readiness of clients. The Employment Readiness Scale™, through its multiple administration feature, offers an opportunity to measure whether or not intended outcomes are being achieved, allocate resources more efficiently, and assist clients more effectively.

Note: To obtain more information on the Employment Readiness Scale™, or for information on how your organization can obtain a license to use the ERS, please send your query to: ERSinfo@EmploymentReadiness.org.

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