

Ensuring Effective Employment Services

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BACKGROUND

Employment service agencies are facing increasing pressure to reduce time spent with clients and accelerate their acquisition of a job. At the same time, agencies need to justify funding requests and the use of funds received. If clients transition to work before they are ready, the negative results are costly—psychologically to clients and families, and financially to public assistance funds. While much has been put in place—within Canada, North America, and around the world—to help clients make positive transitions from education or training to work, a lack of reliable outcome measures has inhibited our progress (Bezanson 2001).

In 1998, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the government of British Columbia identified a need for a tool to measure the effectiveness of interventions while also categorizing a client's employment readiness, suggesting suitable interventions, and predicting employment outcomes. The research and development of the tool was partially funded by Human Resources Development Canada and the government of British Columbia. Its purpose was to combine client assessment with accountability reporting, through a multi-administration design, and go beyond the traditional measures of "Did the person get a job?" or "Did the person go on to further education or training?" The design work was focused on creating a valid and reliable tool, reflecting a validated model of employment readiness, and able to do the following:

- (a) Provide feedback on individuals' strengths and challenges in becoming employed
- (b) Anticipate what assistance people would need to become employed
- (c) Support practitioners in their work to improve readiness
- (d) Measure changes from interventions in employment readiness
- (e) Predict employment outcomes accurately
- (f) Document program effectiveness and provide accountability reporting

DEFINING EMPLOYMENT READINESS

Although the concepts of employability and employment readiness may seem straightforward, their specification for measurement purposes is complex. Over the past five years, there has been a 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 HRDC identified four employability factors—career decision-making, skills enhancement, job search, and job maintenance—that have been the foundation for its employment counselling measurement model (Busque 1995; Rosove 1982). International research has validated the first three factors in particular as being at the core of employability. With increased volatility in the labour market, a fifth employability factor has emerged as important—ongoing career management (Riddle 1998; Riddle 1999).

Focusing only on employability ignores the context of work-related behaviour. One aspect of that context, recognized in the original HRDC model, is barriers to employment. While they are 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, Kamarck, and Mermelstein 1983).

The other aspect is the personal resources that an individual brings to work 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 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. 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 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.

Field Test Client Characteristics

Client Variable	% 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 *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 following:

- (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% 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 would 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 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

The ERS, through a sponsor licence, 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

The sponsor portion of the Web site has been equipped with the capability to code client data from agencies in three different ways (selected by the funder) for analytical purposes.

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 the intended outcomes are being achieved.

To obtain more information on the Employment Readiness Scale™, or for information on how your organization can obtain a licence to use the ERS, please send your query to: ERSinfo@EmploymentReadiness.org or call 604-696-6377.

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