

Helping Youth Achieve Employment Readiness: Measuring Our Success

by Valerie G. Ward and Dorothy I. Riddle

An abridged version of this article was published in *The B.C. Counsellor: Journal of the British Columbia School Counsellors' Association* (Vol. 24, No. 1, 2002).

Abstract

To assist youth in making effective career/life transitions from school to work or to further education/training, those working with youth need to be able to measure the employment readiness of youth and demonstrate increases in employment readiness as learning outcomes of the programs and services and/or work experience they provide. Employment readiness includes not only employability factors but also the ability to recognize challenges faced and to manage those challenges appropriately. The Employment Readiness Scale™ measures all three components of employment readiness. Since it has been validated for multiple administrations, it can be used before and after career development programming or work experience so as to determine what types of assistance are most needed by, and most effective with, youth. Examples are given of how such an employment readiness measure can be used in different settings with youth.

The Context

Many youth making the transition from education to the work force appear to “slip through the cracks”, and it seems to be anyone’s best guess if they are truly “employment ready” when they exit the school system. Waiting until they are employed to learn whether they are ready for work can be costly for youth as well as for employers and can contribute to employers’ hesitancy to offer opportunities for youth to gain much-needed work experience. Ineffective transitions to work are also costly to society whether, for example, youth rely longer on parents for financial support, or they end up on public assistance or, lacking a positive attachment to the work force, they turn to criminal or “underground” means of gaining income. While much has been put in place – within Canada, North America and around the world – to help youth effect positive transitions from education or training to work, a lack of reliable outcome measures has inhibited our progress to date (Bezanson, 2001).

Facilitating effective career/life transitions from school to work or to further education/training is increasingly seen to be vital to the success of youth and an important role of schools (Adams & Bopokham, 1995; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001). Career educators, counsellors, employers and community partners working with youth need to find ways of measuring the employment readiness of youth and be able to demonstrate increases in employment readiness as learning outcomes of the programs and services and/or work experience they provide. Measuring readiness before and after interventions or work experience may be helpful and relevant in working with any of the following groups:

- Students engaged in career education programs.
- Students who enter the work force directly after secondary school completion.
- Students and other youth involved in work experience programs linked to secondary or post-secondary education.
- Apprentices and others involved in learning work skills on the job.
- Early school leavers (dropouts) who make a transition to work before completing secondary school.
- Students in transition from post-secondary programs into the work force.
- Youth with diverse needs (e.g., disabilities) whose challenges may have a significant impact on their employment readiness or work options.
- Youth in transition from correctional facilities to work.
- Youth who lose their jobs or are returning to the work force after a period of absence.
- Youth who change directions, e.g., are “employment ready” in a previous line of work but not yet ready in a new one.

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 & 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 increase in volatility in the labour market, a fifth employability factor has emerged as important – ongoing career management (Riddle, 1998 & 1999).

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, Kamarck, & 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 & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 1992, 1997).

The ASIP approach makes a direct link between self-efficacy and stress management (Cohen et al, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Jerusalem & 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 model includes the five employability factors listed above, four personal support factors (self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, social supports, and work history), and three types of challenges (personal, environmental, and systemic). The first portion of the scale measures the employability and personal support factors using a five-point scale. The second portion of the scale is structured as a stress scale and measures the 30 most common challenges – e.g., “ I don’t feel comfortable in most work settings” (personal), “I worry about someone close to me who uses drugs” (environmental), or “I don’t have easy access to transportation” (systemic). 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 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
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: 14-25 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*[™]. As one of the design features, the ERS was developed so that it could reliably measure changes in employment readiness over time; therefore, the web-based version has been programmed so that an individual can take the ERS up to three times with a single access code and the results of the various administrations will be compared. The research and development was partially funded by Human Resources Development Canada and the government of British Columbia in order to develop an effective means of assessing employment readiness and measuring the outcomes achieved by programs and services (going beyond the traditional measures of “Did the person get a job?” or “Did the person go on to further education or training?”).

Measuring Employment Readiness in Field Settings: 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 could play a valuable role in measuring the learning outcomes of career development and work experience programs. Table 2 below contains illustrations of contexts where the multiple-administration feature of the ERS can be used to help ensure success.

Table 2
Four Sample Applications of a Measure of Employment Readiness

Transition Group	ERS Admins.	Sample Timing of Administering the ERS	Use of ERS Results
<i>Students in career education programs (especially those entering the work force directly after secondary school completion)</i>	#1	Before career education programs at senior secondary levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a benchmark or starting point for learning. Identify or confirm what needs to be covered in the career education curriculum.
	#2	At the mid-point of career education programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess whether any changes in emphasis may be required in curriculum.
	#3	After career education programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the impact of the career education program in achieving employment readiness. Assess whether any changes in emphasis may be required in curriculum.
<i>Students and other youth involved in work experience programs linked to secondary or post-secondary education</i> <i>Apprentices and others involved in learning work skills on the job</i>	#1	Before classroom component or work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a benchmark or starting point for learning. Identify or confirm what employment readiness areas need to be covered in classroom and/or work experience.
	#2	After classroom component and prior to work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine impact of classroom component on employment readiness. Assess whether any changes in emphasis may be required in curriculum.
	#3	After completing the work experience or completing the first level of apprenticeship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine the impact of work experience (or apprenticeship) on employment readiness. Identify what further employment readiness assistance may be required. Assess whether any changes or additions may be required in the work experience learning process.
<i>Early school leavers (dropouts) making a transition to work before completing secondary school</i> <i>Youth with multiple challenges to employment readiness (e.g, disability or in transition from correctional system).</i>	#1	At exit interview or initial employment service contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use assessment results to link individual to assistance with work transition (programs or services).
	#2	After first intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine effectiveness of interventions. Identify what further assistance may be required.
	#3	After second intervention, if applicable, or when judged by staff to be employment ready	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine effectiveness of interventions. Identify what further assistance may be required.

Table 2
Four Sample Applications of a Measure of Employment Readiness

Transition Group	ERS Admins.	Sample Timing of Administering the ERS	Use of ERS Results
<i>Youth who lose their jobs or are returning to the work force after a period of absence</i> <i>Youth who are changing directions, e.g., “employment ready” in a previous line of work but not yet ready in a new one</i>	#1	Initial assessment at first point of service (e.g., case manager)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a benchmark or employment readiness starting point. • Use assessment results to link individual to assistance with work transition (programs or services).
	#2	After first intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the impact of the first intervention on employment readiness. • Identify what further assistance may be required.
	#3	After any subsequent interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine effectiveness of interventions. • Identify what further assistance may be required.

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 youth as a learning outcome of whatever programs, services or work experiences may be offered. The Employment Readiness Scale™, through its multiple administration feature, offers an opportunity to measure whether the intended learning outcomes are met and how likely the youth are to achieve work success.

During its development, the ERS was field tested with over 150 youth between 18-24 years of age. Since the employment readiness factors are also applicable at a younger age, many applications of the tool are also possible in secondary schools. Readers are invited to explore innovative uses of the tool in their own settings. To obtain more information on the Employment Readiness Scale™, or for information on how your school, agency or organization can obtain a license to use the ERS, please send your query to: ERSinfo@EmploymentReadiness.org or call 604-696-6377.

About the Authors

Valerie Ward is a consultant specializing in developing programs, learning resources, partnerships and strategies to advance career development. She is co-author of the Employment Readiness Scale™ and heads Valerie G. Ward Consulting Ltd. in Vancouver, BC.

Dr. Dorothy Riddle has helped organizations in Canada and abroad to develop and evaluate employment-related services, has co-authored workbooks for career development services, and has co-designed a range of online assessment tools, including the Employment Readiness Scale™.

References

- Adams, S. & Bopokham, R. (1995). In the field: Infusing employability skills into the senior high school social studies classroom. *Guidance & Counselling*, 10(2), 44-49.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1992). Exercise of personal agency through the self-efficacy mechanism. In R. Schwarzer (ed.), *Self-efficacy: Thought control of action*, 3-18. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Bezanson, L. (2001). Connecting career development with public policy: Moving from a “think tank to a “do tank”. *Connect Symposium 2001*, 1, 1-3.

- British Columbia. Ministry of Education, Special Programs Branch (2001). Career/life transitions for students with diverse needs: A resource guide for schools.
- Busque, G. (1995). A measurement model for employment counselling. Ottawa-Hull: Human Resources Development Canada. ERIC Document no. ED414520.
- Cohen, S., Karmarck, T., & Mermelstein, R (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, 24, 385-396.
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T.A. (1985). Social support and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98, 310-357.
- Ellig, B.R. (1998). Employment and employability: Foundation of the new social contract. *Human Resource Management*, 37(2), 173-175.
- Haché, L., Redekopp, D.E. & Jarvis, P. (1998). *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs: K-Adult Handbook. Demonstration Edition*. Ottawa: National Life/Work Centre.
- Jerusalem, M., & Schwarzer, R. (1992). Self-efficacy as a resource factor in stress appraisal processes. In R Schwartz (ed.), *Self-efficacy: Thought control of action*, 195-213. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere.
- Luzzo, D.A & Hutcheson, K.G. (1996). Causal attributions of sex differences associated with perceptions of occupational barriers. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 75, 124-130.
- McKenzie, P. & Wurzburg, G. (1998). Lifelong learning and employability. *The OECD Observer*, 209, 13-17.
- Riddle, D.I. (1999). Career self-management in the new world of work. *NATCON Papers 1999*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Riddle, D.I. (1998). A roadmap for career management. *NATCON Papers 1998*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Riddle, D.I., and V.G. Ward (2000). Ongoing career management in the millennium. *NATCON Papers 2000*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Rosove, B. (1982). Employability assessment: Its importance and one way of doing it. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 19(3), 113-123.
- Solberg, B.S. et al. (1998). The Adaptive Success Identity Plan (ASIP): A Career intervention for college students. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 47, 48-95.
- Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle (1998). Refinement and testing of the Client Readiness Scale: Review of research findings. Prepared for Human Resources Development Canada.
- Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle (2001). Summary of research on the Employment Readiness Scale™.

The Employment Readiness Scale

Funded primarily through Human Resources Development Canada and the British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, and co-developed by Valerie G. Ward Consulting Ltd., Service-Growth Consultants Inc., and Bayleaf Software, the Employment Readiness Scale offers a unique combination of benefits to clients, agencies and sponsors of career and employment services.

The ERS has been developed for use in a range of educational and service settings to address six key objectives:

- a) Provide feedback on individuals' strengths and challenges in becoming employed*
- b) Anticipate what assistance people will 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*

Designed as a self-assessment of nine readiness factors plus challenges (or barriers) faced, the ERS also provides a printable feedback report to be reviewed with a staff member. Factors where individuals are not yet employment ready are automatically displayed as possible categories for a basic action plan. Individuals can re-take the ERS in order to document their progress after interventions and verify whether or not they are equipped for independent job search.

The ERS has three gateways: Client, Agency and Sponsor. The initial entry point to the public portion of each gateway in both languages is located at www.EmploymentReadiness.org. Access to the secure portion of each gateway, including the scale itself and a range of summary report options, is provided to licensees on a fee-per-use basis.

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 assessments with detailed information on the individual's readiness*
- b) Documents the extent of assistance required*
- c) Identifies appropriate program and service options for individuals*
- d) Documents progress towards employment readiness from programs offered*
- e) Supports program planning*
- f) Provides aggregated reports that can be submitted to funders for accountability reporting*

The ERS, through a Sponsor license, provides funders with roll-up reports that:

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

For further information, contact ERSinfo@EmploymentReadiness.org or 604-696-6377.