

Maximizing Employment Readiness

Valerie G. Ward

Valerie G. Ward Consulting Ltd.
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Dr. Dorothy I. Riddle

Service-Growth Consultants Inc.
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Denise Lloyd

Service-Growth Consultants Inc.
Victoria, BC, Canada

© 2004 Valerie G. Ward, Dorothy I. Riddle, and Denise Lloyd. The authors own the copyright of this article. You may photocopy or reprint this article, or a section of it, provided that you acknowledge the authors.

As the provision of career development and employment programs is increasingly privatized, agencies delivering employment and career services increasingly need to account to government funders against measurable outcomes. Consistent measurement of clients before and after interventions and the ability to aggregate data across clients and service providers can offer powerful data for accountability as well as for program planning purposes.

Defining and Measuring Employment Readiness

Career development and employment service agencies around the country are working diligently to move clients off income assistance or employment insurance and into meaningful, productive employment. In order to do this, service providers need to have a clear understanding of what makes a difference in employment readiness and what programming they need to provide. Based on extensive field testing and validation, the conceptual model underlying the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) has been shown to provide a valid and comprehensive model of employment readiness. That model defines employment readiness as being able, with little or no outside help, to find, get, and keep an appropriate job as well as to be able to manage transitions to new jobs as needed. It includes three groups of factors, all of which are critical to client success in their work life:

1. Employability Dimensions:

- Career decision-making, or knowing what type of work suits you
- Skills enhancement, or having the skills for the work you want
- Job search, or having the skills to find work
- Job maintenance, or having the skills to keep work once found
- Ongoing career management, or being able to manage work transitions

2. Supports for Dealing with Challenges:

- 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

3. Challenges:

- Personal challenges, or stresses a client can address on their own
- Environmental challenges, or responsibilities with which clients need help
- Systemic challenges, or stresses from physical or attitudinal barriers in our community

For agencies to convince their funders that they are successful with clients, they need to be able to demonstrate that they have improved clients' employment success. Traditionally, the performance of these agencies has been measured by how many clients obtained jobs; however, agencies do not control the job market and can make little difference if employers are not hiring. More appropriately, agency performance can be measured by whether or not the clients with whom they work become employment ready. Because the ERS has been validated for repeat administrations, it can be used to measure change in clients as a result of agency interventions and thus to demonstrate whether or not agencies have assisted clients in becoming employment ready.

This paper reports the results of using the Employment Readiness Scale™ with 19,708 clients in 108 agencies across Canada. These clients included 22 percent Aboriginal, 8 percent persons with disabilities, 12 percent visible minorities, and 53 percent women. Ages ranged from 14 years old to 65 years of age, with 3 percent 18 and under, 21 percent 19-24 years old, 13 percent 25-29 years old, 44 percent 30-45 years old, and 19 percent over 45 years old.

Helping Clients Become Employment Ready

The Majority of Clients Have More Than Job Search Issues

Although many programs are intended simply to help clients develop a resume and search for a job, initially assessments using the ERS with over 19,000 clients indicate that the vast majority need assistance with more than job search (see Table 1). Indeed, 62 percent of all clients taking the ERS initially were “not ready”, meaning that they had at least three employment readiness factors on which they needed assistance in order to become successfully employed. Research has shown that, if such clients do not get the assistance needed, they have only a 40 percent chance of obtaining employment within 12 weeks, with a high probability of losing that job (Ward and Riddle 1999, 2001). On their first take of the ERS, 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.

Table 1: Percent of Clients Who Need Assistance
(n = 19,708)

Employment Readiness Factor	Percent of Clients Who Need Assistance		
	All Clients	“Minimally Ready”	“Not Ready”
Employability Dimension			
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%
Supports			
Work history	51%	33%	70%
Social supports	46%	29%	64%
Self-efficacy	42%	14%	63%
Outcome expectancy	25%	8%	36%
Challenges			
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

For 62 percent of clients that tested “not ready,” over 70 percent needed assistance on four of the five employability dimensions and over 60 percent needed assistance on three of the four supports. 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.

“In Canada, \$113 billion was invested by all levels of government in the past year [2002] on social services including social assistance and welfare. Inability to locate and maintain suitable and fulfilling learning and work opportunities is a contributing factor for some recipients. Significant savings could accrue if more citizens possessed the skills they needed to self-reliantly plan and manage their careers and constructively address change. For example, a modest 1 percent saving on these expenditures would generate over \$1 billion annually” (Jarvis 2003, 10). Addressing only job search skills could be a waste of public funds for 84 percent of clients if those programs are not supplemented with assistance in the other areas where clients lack employment readiness skills. On the other hand, addressing all relevant employment readiness issues could provide substantial savings in the long run.

Addressing Multiple Factors Pays Off

Research shows that just being self-sufficient in the five employability dimensions is not enough (Ward and Riddle 1999, 2003). Most clients face a number of barriers or challenges that act as stressors and can be incapacitating if not managed well. Clients facing significant challenges without assistance in handling

them are likely to fail at work even if they are successful in getting a job. So all three parts of the Employment Readiness model are equally important to client success.

The ERS provides agencies with the opportunity to code employment status 12, 26, and 52 weeks after assistance and link it to the employment readiness status of the client. This allows agencies to test whether or not assistance beyond job search or job placement is worthwhile. For agencies using this coding option, the following results were demonstrated. 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.

Current Programs Do Affect More Than Job Search Skills

For the 3,563 clients who took the Employment Readiness Scale™ both before and after interventions, the post-intervention results showed over 50 percent improvement on five of the factors. 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 2: Percent of Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient

(n = 3,563)

Employment Readiness Factor	Percent Self-Sufficient		Percent Increase in Self-Sufficiency
	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	
Employability Dimension			
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%
Supports			
Social supports	47%	71%	51.1%
Work history	43%	59%	37.2%
Self-efficacy	51%	69%	35.3%
Outcome expectancy	68%	78%	14.7%

All Clients Need Help with 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 1 indicate that 80 percent of clients reported that they had significant environmental challenges – i.e., responsibilities such as childcare 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. In British Columbia, for example, the Ministry of Human Resources (who is responsible for the management of employment services to persons in receipt of income assistance) made cuts to their program design in April 2003. As a result, persons on income assistance were no longer able to exempt earnings from their income assistance so as to top-up their income to assist in meeting minimum living costs. As well, these new policies included cuts to childcare support, transition to work assistance funds (money for work clothes and transportation), and the \$6 training wage (Klein and Long 2003). Client data from the ERS indicate that such cuts could undermine the actual objective of the BC government to get income assistance recipients successfully back to work.

Even Older Clients 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.

Ongoing Career Management Skills Can Prevent Recycling

Most clients are not concerned with issues beyond getting a job; however, 63 percent of them demonstrate that they did not have the skills to manage transitions between jobs (see Table 1). 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) will mean a high probability of cycling back onto public assistance. For fiscal year 2000-01, Human Resources Development Canada paid a total of \$9.5 billion to about 650,000 EI recipients. If EI recipients were "...able self-reliantly to manage their work and learning opportunities and to move from one work role to another as needed, EI payments would decrease. A 1 percent improvement in this category would result in savings to the EI fund of about \$100 million annually" (Jarvis 2003, 11). These figures indicate the magnitude of savings that could be achieved with attention on ongoing career management skills.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of career development agencies in improving the employment readiness of clients has a direct impact on the savings generated to government, as well as on the economic and social wellbeing of the individuals themselves. To be effective, agencies need to be able to quickly assess the employment readiness needs of their clients, address the full range of needs either directly or through referral, and measure the success of their programs for clients. But agencies can only be effective if funding is available for appropriate programs. Agencies and governments need to look at the needs of the clients and the nature of the funding mechanisms and find a fit. Currently, government-funding models encourage agencies to find the quickest route to employment for clients (Ward and Riddle 2002). This does not always provide the client with the employment readiness skills to manage their work life successfully on a long-term basis. It is critical that funders recognize the investment required in the range of assistance needed for ultimate success.

References

Jarvis, P. *Career Management Paradigm Shift: Prosperity for Citizens, Windfall for Government*. Ottawa: National Life/Work Centre, March 2003.

Klein, S. and A. Long. "A Bad Time to be Poor: An Analysis of British Columbia's New Welfare Policies." Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Social Planning and Research Council of BC, June 2003.

Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle. "The Employment Readiness Scale: Field Test Results and Recommendations Final Report." Prepared for Human Resources Development Canada, May 1999.

Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle. "Summary of Research on the Employment Readiness Scale™." 2001.

Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle. "Ensuring Effective Employment Services." *NATCON Papers 2002 Les actes du CONAT*, 2002.

Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle. "Measuring Employment Readiness." *NATCON Papers 2003 Les actes du CONAT*, 2003.