

Measuring Employment Readiness

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With growing pressure to facilitate rapid work transitions and be accountable for results, there is an increasing need to accurately measure employment readiness. Using the online Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS), it is now possible not only to assess initial client readiness, but also to measure client changes over time and generate roll-up reports across all clients that can provide objective input for program planning and accountability reporting (Ward and Riddle 2002a).

After 3 years of field testing with 758 clients, the ERS was launched at the end of 2001. During 2002, 108 agencies were licensed to use the ERS in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and New Brunswick, Canada, including the following types of organizations: Employment service agencies, provincial government employment offices, community colleges and adult education programs, First Nations, programs for persons with disabilities, programs for immigrants, and youth custody programs.

Characteristics of the Client Population

Over 6,100 clients took the ERS in 2002 and the data reported in this paper are based on their ERS results. A breakdown of the age distribution of those clients showed that 3% were 14-18 years old, 18% were 19-24 years old, 14% were 25-29 years old, 46% were 30-45 years old, and 19% were over 45 years old. Approximately half (48%) were women, 23% were Aboriginal, 12% were persons with disabilities, and 11% were visible minorities.

One of the most interesting findings, which has implications for resource allocation, was that 59% of the clients tested scored as “not ready.” Based on the field test results (Ward and Riddle 2001), this means that, unless they receive appropriate assistance, these “not ready” clients have less than a 40% chance of finding employment within 12 weeks and a low probability of retaining that employment. Given an increased emphasis on rapid transitions to work, many employment service environments face pressure to “do more with less” and to minimize the extent of intervention that clients receive. However, these findings show that a large proportion of clientele seeking employment services do indeed require more than self-service or what minimum levels of assistance can offer.

Model of Employment Readiness

The employment readiness model embedded in the ERS measures nine factors (see Figure 1) plus the 30 most common challenges that affect work success (Ward and Riddle 1998, 1999). It assumes that clients are “employment ready” when they are able, with little or no outside help, to get and keep an appropriate job as well as to manage transitions to new jobs as needed. In order to become employment ready, clients need to understand the challenges they face, have the personal supports necessary to deal effectively with those challenges, and become self-sufficient on five employability dimensions.

Employability Dimensions

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

Supports for Dealing with Challenges

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

Figure 1. Employment Readiness Factors

Client Challenges

Results from the 6,100+ clients indicated that the most common sources of stress are “environmental” challenges. Most of the challenges in this category are responsibilities people have (such as child care) that could interfere with work commitments. Even for “fully ready” clients, 58% reported significant stress from environmental challenges, with 45% reporting “personal” challenges (such as lack of education) as well. Of course, for “not ready” clients, stress levels were even higher, with 80% reporting environmental challenges and 79% reporting personal challenges. For persons with disabilities, 90% reported personal challenges.

The most common challenges reported by clients were:

- I never seem to have enough money to survive without assistance (54%)
- I don't have much education (41%)
- I have to take care of my children (34%)
- I don't have proper clothes for work (33%)
- I am having health or emotional problems (32%)

There may be a link between the financial stresses many clients are experiencing and the health and emotional challenges they are reporting. These data suggest that clients at all levels of readiness have challenges for which they need coping strategies if they are to be successful in their work life.

Client Resources for Coping with Challenges

There are four factors measured by the ERS to assess the personal resources that clients have for coping effectively with challenges so that they do not interfere with work commitments (see Figure 1). The weakest factor for the 6,100+ clients was Work History. More specifically, 51% of all clients and 67% of “not ready” clients indicated that they had not yet had a positive experience with work. Persons with disabilities (55%) and youth (53%) were most likely to report a lack of positive work experience; however, 41% of older workers also reported that they had not yet had a positive work experience. While supervised work experiences have often had a lower funding priority in recent years, these data suggest a need to re-examine funding priorities. It would appear that programs such as job coaching and apprenticeships or other workplace-based training with a strong supervisory component are very much needed.

The second weakest factor was Social Supports, with 48% of all clients and 64% of “not ready” clients indicating that they did not know to whom they would turn for help if they ran into difficulty. Perhaps not surprisingly, persons with disabilities (56%) were the most likely to report being socially isolated and not having a support network. More unexpected was the finding that older workers (i.e., over 45 years) were the second most likely to report isolation and the lack of a network (51%). It may be that their strongest networks were in their previous employment and, after they lost their jobs, these were no longer perceived as a source of support.

Self-Efficacy, or a sense of personal competence, was a problem for 43% of all clients and 63% of “not ready” clients. Again, persons with disabilities (56%) were the most likely to report difficulties. It appears that the belief in one's ability to perform well is foundational to success, not only in coping with challenges but also in the employability dimensions of making an appropriate occupational choice, acquiring the required knowledge and skills, looking for and maintaining work, and ongoing career management.

Employability Dimensions

At the point of taking the ERS initially, clients were least likely to be self-sufficient in Job Search skills (56% of all clients, and 87% of “not ready” clients) and Ongoing Career Management (60% of all clients, and 89% of “not ready” clients). Job Search is the most commonly funded intervention so the likelihood of clients receiving job search assistance is high. However, if clients are not already “high” on personal supports such as Self-Efficacy, they are not likely to be successful despite the job search assistance. Ongoing Career Management has received very

little direct attention, yet it is self-sufficiency in Ongoing Career Management that will keep clients from cycling back onto public assistance when they come to a change point in their work life (Riddle 1998).

It is also important to note that, while the emphasis of programming has been on job search skills, 40% of all clients and 70% of “not ready” clients reported needing help with Career Decision-Making. Making an appropriate occupational choice would seem to be an important prerequisite to success in finding and keeping a job. Persons with disabilities consistently scored as less self-sufficient on each of the employability dimensions.

Measuring Intervention Effectiveness

One of the strengths of the ERS is the fact that it has been validated for repeat administration and so can measure client change (Ward and Riddle 1999). This makes it possible to measure the effectiveness of various interventions. For government-funded interventions that were measured using the ERS in 2002, the following percentages of clients moved from “not self-sufficient” to “self-sufficient” on the factors indicated:

- Career decision-making (43%)
- Ongoing career management (43%)
- Job search (39%)
- Skills enhancement (24%)
- Job maintenance (22%)

The above percentages are interesting in that, for the agencies evaluating the effectiveness of their interventions, the primary emphasis was on job search programs. These results suggest, on the one hand, that some programs may be having benefits in other areas (such as improving Ongoing Career Management) that were not directly targeted. On the other hand, it may be that the intended results of some programs are not being achieved because it is assumed that clients have foundational readiness factors in place that, in fact, they do not.

Field testing of the ERS had already demonstrated that, if clients were self-sufficient on a given factor, the likelihood of their being employed in 12 weeks after a job search intervention was increased by the following percentages (Ward and Riddle 2001):

- Job maintenance, by 190%
- Job search, by 96%
- Skills enhancement, by 58%
- Ongoing career management, by 28%
- Career decision-making, by 3%

Notice that the order of importance of the factors above is almost the complete opposite of the percent of the factors showing actual client improvement (i.e., a movement to self-sufficiency) in current programming. So clients are improving most on the employability factors that have the least direct relevance to their acquiring and maintaining a job. For example, while becoming self-sufficient in Job Maintenance increases a client’s chance of success by 190%, only 22% of the clients who were initially low in Job Maintenance became self-sufficient as a result of the interventions provided. This suggests that policy-makers and service providers may need to place greater emphasis on factors such as Job Maintenance and Work History, at least for certain groups of clients. The ERS can help address this issue by providing a consistent and reliable means of finding out which clients require these more extensive interventions and determining whether the interventions achieve their intended goals.

Finally, an analysis of improvement in personal support factors as a result of interventions showed that the following percent of persons moved from “low” to “high”:

- Social supports (37%)
- Self-efficacy (23%)
- Work history (19%)
- Outcome expectancy (17%)

Next to Job Maintenance, high scores on Social Supports are the most likely to lead to success in acquiring a job within 12 weeks – the increase being 160%. So the documented client improvement on Social Supports is good news. However, with 67% of “not ready” clients not yet having had a positive experience with work, the relatively low rate of client improvement in Work History is a concern, as discussed above.

Conclusions

The accurate assessment of employment readiness is important from many perspectives. It has the potential to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of interventions by giving service providers data on where clients are starting from at the point of initial intake, thus enabling them to design and intervene with programs and services that are specifically targeted to client needs. Assistance with program design is important not only for adult clients but also for youth who are still learning about how to be successful in the domain of work (Ward and Riddle 2002b). Another key benefit is in demonstrating the changes in employment readiness that have taken place after interventions. This enables us to know “what works” for which clients at what time, and to refine programs and services to increase the likelihood of successful employment outcomes for these clients.

Data from the first year of implementation of the Employment Readiness Scale™ offer us valuable information for program planning and policy decisions. Findings that 59% of clients need extensive assistance rather than simply job search support, that supervised work experience is lacking, and that job maintenance skills are critical to success all suggest the need for a re-examination of funding priorities. As the use of the ERS continues to grow and expand, the findings will offer an increasingly rich source of insight into the populations we serve and the impact of the work we do.

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