Measuring and Evaluating Performance

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

Dorothy I. Riddle
Service-Growth Consultants Inc.
Vancouver, BC Canada

Background

It is very difficult to determine the effectiveness of employment programs and services unless one has the ability to acquire relevant baseline data on client starting points and then measure their changes over time. Traditionally, because valid longitudinal data on large client populations were not available, employment programs and services have been designed and received resource allocations based on assumptions about what would be most helpful to clients. As the demand for resource accountability grows – particularly the need to assess return on investment (ROI) – subjective impressions are not adequate. But, in the quest for objective data, it is vitally important to be measuring and evaluating the appropriate variables.

The challenge that arises is how to approach employment services measurement and evaluation in a more relevant and reliable manner. The basic prerequisite is to have a valid model of employment readiness that can serve as the foundation and framework for that measurement process. As soon as one accepts the need for objective measurement, two issues emerge.

First, the long-term goal of employment services is to reduce the economic and social costs of unemployment (and under-employment), including the need for employment insurance or income assistance, by increasing clients' permanent attachment to the labour force and appropriate employment. However, the creation of employment is, in fact, outside the control of agencies assisting unemployed clients. Therefore, the appropriate ROI focus needs to be on how effectively agencies and programs are preparing clients to be employment ready and therefore successful in the workplace. The traditional measure of number of persons employed as the result of an intervention is actually a performance measure of how well governments or other funders are allocating resources in support of the delivery of employment services.

Second, in order to determine whether or not employment service agencies are, in fact, improving client employment readiness, there needs to be a standard against which measurement can occur (i.e., a valid model of employment readiness factors). In order to be useful, the model of employment readiness must be measurable in a reliable, valid, and practical manner and be able to measure change over time.

At the request of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and the Province of British Columbia, the authors developed and validated a nine-factor model of employment readiness (Ward & Riddle, 1999; 2002). That model was then developed into the web-based Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS), which was field-tested over a three-year period (Ward & Riddle, 2001; 2003). This research verified that: (a) the ERS could validly measure the nine-factor model of employment readiness, and (b) it could be reliably used with clients repeatedly over time in order to capture changes in employment readiness. Since the ERS has now been administered to over 31,000 clients in Canada, Australia, and the U.S.A., those data will be used to illustrate the measurement and evaluation issues described below.

A Four-Step Measurement and Evaluation Process

The measurement and evaluation process for employment service agencies and programs parallels the process of assisting clients. In each instance, evaluation needs to be preceded by: (a) a needs assessment, (b) a process of planning how best to meet the identified needs, and then (c) the delivery of appropriate interventions.

Step #1: Assessment

The most critical issue in assessment is making sure that the correct factors are measured in a consistent manner. Using a tool such as the ERS as the first step in assessment provides staff and clients with a standard framework for identifying the factors that need to be addressed. In contrast to an intake interview, such an assessment provides objective baseline data from which to measure change. Using a standard objective assessment of employment readiness can also help avoid making inaccurate assumptions. For example, one might suppose that older workers who have been employed over a long period of time but are now unemployed due to industrial restructuring would need help primarily with re-skilling and job search. However, the ERS data indicate that 56 percent of clients over 45 years of age need assistance with at least four of the nine employment readiness factors, with 49 percent having a very weak social support system and 41 percent lacking a positive work history.

For the purpose of determining resource priorities, it is important to gain a sense of the needs of groups of clients. Organizations responsible for program design and planning need to identify the most common needs across clients as well as the areas in which it will be important to develop community partnerships for referral purposes. Obtaining real-time needs assessment data on large numbers of clients requires an automated mechanism for aggregating client needs on an ongoing basis. The ERS provides such a facility through roll-up reports across clients that have taken the scale. Data from use of the ERS to date show that, at the beginning of service, 61 percent of the clients were “not ready” (i.e., they needed assistance with at least three factors other than job search skills). Earlier ERS research has shown that, without such assistance, “not ready” clients have a 60 percent chance of failure in finding and keeping a job (Ward & Riddle, 2001).

Step #2: Planning

From the perspective of client assistance, planning needs to include a step-by-step roadmap for clients of what they need to do in order to become employment ready. Scores on the employment readiness factors need to be linked to intervention priorities. Any barriers that could undermine success need to be addressed. Ideally, the client needs to understand what is required to become employment ready and committed to a relevant action plan. Data from the ERS indicate that, for 81 percent of clients (including 67 percent of clients that score as “fully ready” for independent job search), the action plan needs to include ways to address the client challenges that could interfere with success in their work life. Simply addressing employment-specific skills is not enough.

From the perspective of employment service agencies, aggregated needs assessment data can be extremely helpful in program design. For example, one agency using the ERS significantly improved their success rate with a particular group of clients simply by shifting from individual to group assistance because the initial assessments showed that the clients in question had very weak social support networks.

From the perspective of resource allocation, it is helpful to be able to document differences in needs across communities or types of clients. For example, ERS data show that the third most critical need (after ongoing career management skills and job search skills) is assistance with developing positive work experience. These data suggest that investing in programs such as job shadowing, mentoring, apprenticeships, or supervised co-op placements could be very beneficial. Since unaddressed challenges can interfere with successful attachment to work, the aggregated ERS reporting on the most common challenges can also be helpful. For example, in general the most common challenges reported are a lack of sufficient education (64 percent), a lack of financial resources for survival (56 percent), and the need to care for children (40 percent). However, there are some communities in which factors like feeling like a failure are extremely common and also need to be addressed.

Step #3: Interventions

In order to use resources most effectively, clients need to be carefully matched with interventions. It is a waste of both client and staff time for clients to be placed in a program simply because space is available. From the ERS data, one can see that over 10 percent of the clients who initially scored as "fully ready" for independent job search were automatically placed into programming though they did not need it. The top need across all client groups taking the ERS is for assistance with ongoing career management; however, very few interventions are available at the present time that directly address ongoing career management skills. Jarvis (2003) has noted that if there were even a one percent improvement in clients being able "...self-reliantly to manage their work and learning opportunities and to move from one work role to another as needed,...[it] would result in savings to the EI fund of about $100 million annually" (p. 11).

To be most effective, interventions need to be sequenced appropriately. Experience with the ERS has shown that there is a three-tier sequence that works particularly well:

a) Foundational skills

- Self-efficiency
- Outcome expectancy
- Social supports

b) Employability skills

- Career decision-making
- Skills enhancement
- Job maintenance
- Ongoing career management

c) Job acquisition

- Job search skills
- Work history

Step #4: Evaluation

Before programs can be evaluated, there needs to be a determination of the extent of client change, which in turn requires the use of a measurement tool that has been validated for more than one administration. Because the ERS has been shown to be valid for repeat administrations, it can easily provide real-time evaluative data. In addition, for clients, the ability to see graphically the progress that they have made (in the Feedback Report provided by the ERS) can be very affirming.

In order to focus the evaluation process, there also need to be decisions taken as to what particular benefits are important to the organization. There are a number of possible effectiveness benefits that could be targeted and evaluated, including:

- More accurate identification of client needs
- More consistent assessment of clients
- Investment in more relevant programs
- Re-design of programs based on client needs
- Validation of a framework for program design
- Ability to distinguish effective from ineffective programs or agencies
- Optimization of the use of program dollars
- Identification of system-wide best practices

There are also possible efficiency benefits that could be measured and evaluated, including:

- More time-efficient identification of client needs
- More time-efficient use of staff time in assess client outcomes
- Developing a clear contract (i.e., Action Plan) with clients to which they can be held accountable

Data from the ERS can also shed light on gaps between client needs and intended intervention outcomes. Programs targeting job search skills are the most successful of the interventions measured to date by the ERS, providing on average a 113 percent increase in the percentage of clients self-sufficient in job search. Improvement in the other skill areas averaged only a 40 percent change in the percentage of self-sufficient clients. Although the need to gain positive work experience ranked third highest in aggregate client needs, there was only a 33 percent increase in percent of clients becoming self-sufficient in this area as a result of the interventions measured by the ERS.

Data from a tool like the ERS can also be helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of programs with specific groups. Taking persons with disabilities as an example, ERS data demonstrated an overall improvement of 52 percent from the interventions provided. However, a further analysis showed that, while noticeable gains were made by the "not ready" clients with disabilities, they were still not up to the level of self-sufficiency (on post-test) where the "minimally ready" clients with disabilities started.

Conclusion

The economic, social and personal benefits gained through successful employment transitions are undeniable, yet they continue to present significant measurement challenges. Establishing measurement models on a valid foundation is vitally important to the wise investment of time and effort on the part of organizations delivering employment services as well as to the clients they serve. Bringing increased consistency to such measurement offers an opportunity to achieve significant gains in prosperity, reduce dependency on income supports, and ensure that employment service and training dollars are invested wisely. Ongoing innovations in measurement and accountability, based on a solid understanding of the nature of employment readiness, can help make ongoing refinements to the services offered and support continuing gains in the results achieved by service providers.

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