

Targeting Employment Services to Client Needs: Insights and Questions from U.S. Employment Readiness Data

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Although the U.S. recession officially ended in 2009, millions of previously-employed Americans continue to search for work unsuccessfully. Meanwhile, unemployment benefits and funding for programs to assist the unemployed have both been the target of budget cuts. While the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has announced that the official national unemployment rate in October 2013 was 7.3 percent, the unemployment rate for women was cited as 6.4 percent, for blacks as 13.1 percent, and for teenagers as 22.2 percent.¹ The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy announced an October 2013 unemployment rate of 12.8 percent for persons with disabilities.² In this climate, providing the most relevant assistance to clients is critical.

This article examines patterns of employment service needs for each of the client groups noted above. It also looks at the effectiveness of the interventions to which clients are referred in meeting those needs. The data analyzed are from the first 34,000 clients who took the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) in the United States. These data have been consolidated across diverse organizations that have been licensed to use the ERS, which include workforce centers; state, county and municipal departments of social and vocational rehabilitation services; community colleges; Tribal Councils; military transition services; youth centers; and a variety of other community organizations providing employment services.

The ERS is an internationally-validated measure of employment readiness and assesses both employability factors (Career Decision-Making, Skills Enhancement, Job Search, Ongoing Career Management) and soft skills critical to work life success (Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, Social Supports, Work History, and Job Maintenance). For further details about the factors measured by the scale, see Appendix A. Further information about the Scale and its validation process can be found at www.EmploymentReadiness.info.

What Kinds of Assistance Do Clients Need?

When clients take the ERS for the first time, they are asked to self-identify age and demographic categories. This enables data on client needs to be aggregated in order to compare needs, referral patterns, and effectiveness of interventions for different client populations. The data analyses below focus particularly on the 57.2 percent of U.S. clients seeking help to become employed or re-employed who scored as "Not Ready" on the ERS – i.e., needing a substantial amount of assistance with both employability factors and soft skills.

Turning first to the employability factors, Table 1 provides the percent of Not Ready clients in each group that scored as needing help (the percentages shown in bold are significantly higher than the average for all clients). On average, 78 percent of all Not Ready clients reported

¹ See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>.

² See <http://www.dol.gov/odep/>

requiring assistance with employability factors, while clients with disabilities were significantly more likely to need such help (83.5%). As one would expect, the area where the greatest percentage of clients required assistance across all groups was Job Search skills, followed closely by help in managing one’s work life transitions over time (Ongoing Career Management). Regarding Career Decision-Making, 71 percent of Not Ready clients on average required support; however, among clients with disabilities, a significantly higher percent (79%) scored as needing help.

Table 1: Percent of Not Ready Clients Needing Help with Employability Factors

Employability Factor	All Not Ready Clients	Women	Black Clients	Clients with Disabilities	Clients 18 & under
Career decision-making	71%	69%	64%	79%	67%
Skills enhancement	63%	65%	58%	75%	56%
Job search	92%	91%	88%	91%	92%
Ongoing career mgmt.	86%	88%	87%	89%	91%
Average	78.0%	78.3%	74.3%	83.5%	76.5%

When we turn to the soft skills that have become so critical in today’s workplace (Ward & Riddle, 2012), the average requiring assistance drops to 55 percent (see Table 2), which is still over half of the Not Ready clients taking the ERS. Again clients with disabilities were significantly more likely on average to need help than other clients. Clients 18 years old and younger were significantly more likely to need help with Job Maintenance, or the interpersonal skills that are so important for keeping a job once acquired. Seventy percent of clients in all groups reported that they felt that they had not yet had a positive experience in a work context (Work History), even though they might have been employed for a significant portion of their life.

Table 2: Percent of Not Ready Clients Needing Help with Soft Skills

Soft Skill	All Not Ready Clients	Women	Black Clients	Clients with Disabilities	Clients 18 & under
Self-efficacy	60%	62%	60%	72%	57%
Outcome expectancy	38%	39%	37%	52%	39%
Social supports	62%	59%	60%	67%	43%
Work history	70%	74%	77%	74%	78%
Job maintenance	45%	43%	41%	60%	50%
Average	55.0%	55.4%	55.0%	65.0%	53.4%

Where Are Clients Referred?

Organizations are often constrained in their choice of both internal and external referrals. Case workers may recognize that clients could benefit from a particular type of program or service, but that assistance may not be available. Funding typically focuses on Career Exploration and Job Search interventions, making these more readily available and thereby making it more likely that related employability factors are addressed. The importance of interventions to address soft skills is not always recognized or funded.

In recognition that some clients may require help in strengthening soft skills in order to keep work once found or in managing other issues that need to be addressed individually, some organizations provide Employment Counseling and Life Skills Workshops. Other organizations choose to integrate strengthening soft skills into Career Exploration and Job Search interventions.

In order to understand the referral patterns, it will be helpful to step back from the Not Ready clients and look at all clients seeking assistance, regardless of readiness level. Generally speaking, if a sequence of interventions is being provided, the first is usually assistance with career direction (Career Decision-Making), then with acquiring the education and skills to support that career direction (Skills Enhancement), and then with strengthening job search skills (Job Search). Table 3 provides data on the percent of all clients needing help with Career Decision-Making and where clients were initially referred for assistance.

Table 3: Percent of All Clients Needing Help with Career Decision-Making and Where They Were Referred

Employability Factor / Intervention Type	All Clients	Women	Black Clients	Clients with Disabilities	Clients 18 & under
% needing help with:					
Career Decision-Making	44%	44%	36%	62%	46%
% referred only to:					
Career Exploration	75%	77%	23%	93%	37%
Job Search/Job Club	8%	11%	17%	2%	8%
Life Skills	11%	8%	25%	4%	21%
Employment counseling	6%	4%	35%	1%	34%

Initial inspection of the data indicates that overall there has been a good match between needs and referrals *only* for women and clients with disabilities. For both Black clients and clients 18 or younger, a significantly lower proportion of clients who were unclear about a career direction were referred to Career Exploration interventions as compared with the percent who scored as not self-sufficient on this factor (only 23% and 37% respectively).

How Effective Are Interventions Overall?

In order to evaluate the impact of the referral pattern noted above, it will be useful to first examine the effectiveness of interventions in helping clients become self-sufficient on key factors. Two parameters regarding the change data need to be kept in mind. First, in order to be statistically significant, the percent of clients improving (i.e., moving from not self-sufficient to self-sufficient) as a result of an intervention must be more than ten percent. Second, once past the ten percent mark, the improvement for different groups are statistically different from each other if the spread is at least five percent.

From the data in Table 4, we can see that Career Exploration interventions are indeed the most effective at strengthening Career Decision-Making. Both Job Search/Job Club interventions and Life Skills interventions are particularly effective in strengthening Job Search skills. Life

Skills interventions also generated improvement in Career Decision-Making, while Employment Counseling interventions produced no significant change in Career Decision-Making and only a modest improvement in Job Search skills.

Table 4: Percent of All Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient After Interventions, by Intervention Type

Intervention Type	Percent of All Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient on:		
	Career Decision-Making	Job Search	Soft Skills
Career Exploration	28%	11%	14%
Job Search/Job Club	21%	27%	13%
Life Skills	22%	26%	16%
Employment Counseling	10%	12%	4%
Overall client change	26%	25%	15%

With regard to soft skills, there was improvement from Career Exploration, Job Search, and Life Skills interventions; however, Life Skills interventions (which are designed to address soft skills) were not significantly more effective in producing change. If we look in more detail at the specific soft skills (see Table 5), we can see that the apparent ineffectiveness of Employment Counseling interventions was true in addressing all five soft skill factors. Life Skills interventions stand out as being the most effective in improving Work History and Job Maintenance.

Table 5: Percent of All Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient, by Intervention Type

Soft Skill	Type of Intervention			
	Career Exploration	Job Search	Life Skills	Employment Counseling
Self-efficacy	15%	12%	16%	-3%
Outcome expectancy	11%	9%	11%	4%
Social supports	19%	19%	18%	5%
Work history	13%	12%	20%	10%
Job maintenance	11%	11%	16%	4%
Average	14%	13%	16%	4%

Since Employment Counseling interventions did not result in significant gains in either employability factors or soft skills, there is reason for concern as a relatively high percentage of Black clients and clients 18 years old and younger are being referred to Employment Counseling.

In measuring effectiveness, we need to consider not only the percentage of clients who reached self-sufficiency but also those “left behind” who still need help when interventions are complete (see Table 6). While the percent of clients benefiting from Career Exploration interventions alone is significant, the percent of clients “left behind” is significantly higher than in other interventions suggesting that clients need more than simply Career Exploration interventions if they are to also strengthen job search skills and soft skills. This is an important finding given the high percentage of clients referred to Career Exploration programs and services.

As single interventions, both Job Search interventions and Life Skills interventions showed consistently positive results. By contrast, Employment Counseling was ineffective in helping clients become self-sufficient and resulted in higher percentages of clients “left behind.”

Table 6: Percent of All Clients “Left Behind” at the End of Interventions

Intervention Type	Percent of Clients Not Yet Self-Sufficient After the Intervention		
	Career Decision-Making	Job Search Skills	Soft Skills
Career Exploration	38%	65%	41%
Job Search	17%	30%	20%
Life Skills	23%	38%	25%
Employment Counseling	29%	42%	32%
Overall clients left behind	28%	46%	27%

Looking specifically at the Not Ready clients, we see from Table 7 that Black clients were particularly likely to improve on Job Search. All client groups consistently improved significantly more on employability factors than on soft skills regardless of the intervention to which they were referred. We have already seen that more than half of Not Ready clients (and at least 35 percent of all clients) require assistance with soft skills if they are to succeed. Soft skills are foundational to work life success and are unlikely to be strengthened unless addressed directly in more effective ways.

Table 7: Percent of Not Ready Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient After All Interventions, by Client Group

Factor	All Not Ready Clients	Women	Black Clients	Clients with Disabilities	Clients 18 & under
Career Decision-Making	37%	38%	32%	39%	20%
Job Search	36%	33%	42%	22%	36%
Employability factors	34%	33%	34%	29%	25%
Soft Skills	23%	22%	23%	21%	18%

What Are the Consequences for Specific Client Groups?

Turning now to the four client groups analyzed, we see in Table 8 that Career Exploration programs or services were the intervention of choice for women clients; however, they had a relatively high “left behind” rate. Life Skills interventions produced a similar rate of improvement with a lower percentage “left behind,” but only 8 percent of women were referred to these interventions.

Table 8: Effectiveness of Intervention Types for Women

Variable	Type of Intervention			
	Career Exploration	Job Search	Life Skills	Employment Counseling*
% referred	77%	11%	8%	4%
% becoming self-sufficient after intervention:				
Career decision-making	28%	22%	24%	n/a
Job search skills	12%	29%	23%	n/a
Soft skills	19%	12%	18%	n/a
% “left behind”:				
Career decision-making	37%	20%	21%	n/a
Job search skills	64%	31%	38%	n/a
Soft skills	39%	21%	21%	n/a

*While a significant percentage were referred to Employment Counseling, fewer than 100 clients retook the ERS after Employment Counseling and so the change data have not been reported.

In Table 9, we can see that Black clients were most likely to be referred to Employment Counseling; however, Employment Counseling interventions did not produce any significant improvement and resulted in relatively high percentages of clients “left behind.” Again, Life Skills interventions were the most likely to demonstrate improvement, but only 25 percent of Black clients were referred to such interventions.

Table 9: Effectiveness of Intervention Types for Black Clients

Variable	Type of Intervention			
	Career Exploration	Job Search	Life Skills	Employment Counseling
% referred	23%	17%	25%	35%
% becoming self-sufficient after intervention:				
Career decision-making	5%	15%	18%	6%
Job search skills	1%	16%	21%	9%
Soft skills	3%	10%	11%	3%
% “left behind”:				
Career decision-making	37%	21%	25%	23%
Job search skills	53%	32%	32%	38%
Soft skills	32%	17%	22%	28%

Clients with disabilities were referred primarily to Career Exploration programs and services (Table 10). While these interventions were helpful in improving both employability factors and soft skills, they still resulted in a high percentage of clients being “left behind.” Life Skills interventions had a slight edge over Career Exploration interventions in strengthening soft skills and in the percent “left behind”; however, only four percent of clients with disabilities were referred to Life Skills interventions.

Table 10: Effectiveness of Intervention Types for Clients with Disabilities

Variable	Type of Intervention			
	Career Exploration	Job Search	Life Skills	Employment Counseling*
% referred	93%	2%	4%	1%
% becoming self-sufficient after intervention:				
Career decision-making	31%	26%	30%	n/a
Job search skills	13%	28%	23%	n/a
Soft skills	15%	12%	19%	n/a
% “left behind”:				
Career decision-making	38%	28%	33%	n/a
Job search skills	66%	39%	53%	n/a
Soft skills	40%	29%	35%	n/a

*While a significant percentage were referred to Employment Counseling, fewer than 100 clients retook the ERS after Employment Counseling and so the change data have not been reported.

Clients 18 years and younger were referred to multiple types of interventions, but primarily Career Exploration and Employment Counseling. The data in Table 11 indicate that, while these clients improved slightly more in Career Exploration interventions, they were also more likely to be “left behind.” Regarding Employment Counseling, we have already seen from data in Table 4 that it is the least effective intervention and yet 34 percent of young clients were referred to there.

Table 11: Effectiveness of Intervention Types for Clients 18 and Younger

Variable	Type of Intervention			
	Career Exploration	Job Search	Life Skills	Employment Counseling*
% referred	37%	8%	21%	34%
% becoming self-sufficient after intervention:				
Career decision-making	26%	19%	13%	n/a
Job search skills	21%	17%	18%	n/a
Soft skills	19%	20%	20%	n/a
% “left behind”:				
Career decision-making	34%	32%	33%	n/a
Job search skills	55%	42%	41%	n/a
Soft skills	34%	16%	17%	n/a

*While a significant percentage were referred to Employment Counseling, fewer than 100 clients retook the ERS after Employment Counseling and so the change data have not been reported.

Considerations in Addressing Client Needs

The data outlined above invite questions as much as they provide answers. Since many clients begin with a need to clarify their career direction followed by a need for effective job

search skills, the primary referral to Career Exploration interventions is appropriate. However, the data indicate that Career Exploration interventions in and of themselves are not sufficient.

If we consider the referral pattern portrayed in Table 3, combined with outcome results from those referred to Career Exploration, Job Search/Job Club, Life Skills, and Employment Counseling interventions, the following questions arise:

- How can we ensure a better match between client needs and the interventions provided?
- Based on the patterns of need identified, what strategies are optimum for helping each of these client groups?
- What is an acceptable percentage of clients “left behind” at the end of interventions? How can we reduce the percentage “left behind”?

The better we can get at matching client needs and services, the closer we will get to full employment, with an accompanying reduction in public costs for benefits, a more productive economy, and more widespread social-economic well-being. The authors hope that insights from current and future analyses of U.S. Employment Readiness Scale data will play a positive role in contributing to these outcomes.

Interested readers are invited to share their responses to the above questions with the authors. Please e-mail to Valerie Ward at vgward@employmentreadiness.com.

References

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Appendix A

What Are We Measuring? The ERS Model

The Employment Readiness Model underlies the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) and was developed by the authors at the request of the federal government, specifically Human Resources Development Canada. This model and the ERS which measures it were validated as part of a three-year research and development process, overseen by a government steering committee, to ensure validity and reliability (Ward & Riddle, 2001). A U.S. version of the ERS website was launched in 2005 and forms the basis for the data reported in this article.

“Employment readiness” is defined within the ERS as “being able with little or no outside help, to find, acquire and keep an appropriate job as well as to be able to manage transitions to new jobs, as needed.” In the ERS model, “employment ready” means an individual has successfully achieved three interrelated goals:

1. Being self-sufficient in five employability dimensions:

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

2. Understanding the particular stresses or challenges one faces:

- o Personal challenges, which clients can address themselves
- o Environmental challenges, which clients can manage with help
- o Systemic challenges, which have to be addressed on a community basis

3. Coping effectively with the stresses or challenges one faces, drawing on four sources of support:

- o Self-efficacy, or a sense of being able to perform well
- o Outcome expectancy, or whether or not a client expects to succeed
- o Social supports, or the client's network and ability to get help
- o Work history, or the client's perception of their previous success in paid and/or unpaid work

The field research showed that just being self-sufficient in the five employability dimensions 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 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.

One of the unique features of the ERS is that it allows service providers to document client changes through administering the ERS at the beginning of service and again after interventions (up to six times). “Before and after” data can be rolled up across clients. This data on client change can be used for program evaluation and accountability reporting, while also informing

program planning and design. These “before and after” comparisons form the basis for the data in this article that looks at the effectiveness of interventions.

Agencies wishing to use the ERS for before-and-after measurement are asked to create a menu of local interventions, which are then set up for that agency within the ERS. Clients are coded by staff as to the interventions in which they participate, and then data is rolled up across clients to yield the program evaluation data. The ERS asks staff to group their local programs under one of nine categories of intervention:

- o Academic upgrading (including literacy/second language training)
- o Basic employment orientation and life skills
- o Career exploration
- o Career/employment counselling
- o Interventions to address specific challenges
- o Job clubs/job search skills (including resume writing)
- o Job placement
- o Personal support group
- o Skills training (including computer training and vocational training)
- o Workplace-based training/apprenticeship (including job coaching)

These categories – groupings of local programs – form the basis for the data reported “by type of intervention.”

Just before a client begins taking the ERS, they are asked to select from a menu of age categories and to indicate if they are a member of one or more of minority groups drawn from U.S. Census categories. The roll-up data provide the basis for the analyses which are reported by age and/or minority group.

- * While Job Maintenance is one of the five employability dimensions measured by the ERS, it also falls into the category of “soft skills”. In recent years, as organizations using the ERS expressed increasing interest in analyzing soft skills data as a whole and contrasting it with scores on other ERS factors, we began clustering data in this manner, as reflected in this article. “Soft skills” include Job Maintenance and the four Supports (Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, Social Supports and Work History).