

# CRP **Your Source for** **BRIEF** **Issues and Trends in** **Community Rehabilitation**



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## **Individualized Assessment & Employment Planning**

*Finding the right job match depends on a true understanding of a specific individual. A quality assessment, customized for the individual, can provide information needed to attain sustainable employment. Zach Sneed, Ph.D., CRC, has developed a new training program on individualized assessment that combines evidence-based practices with practical applications. He has authored this CRP Brief, which focuses on the components of an individualized assessment as the foundation for optimal employment planning. The individualized assessment training program will be offered through the Region VI CRP-RCEP.*

### **BACKGROUND**

A critical component of employment services provided by CRPs is the assessment process. A thorough individualized assessment serves as one of the foundations for services that follow. Assessment is also an ongoing process, one that yields valuable information about what the consumer wants to do, the kinds of jobs and tasks that might be appropriate, and the types of services that may be needed. As early as the 1920s, the federal government issued educational material stressing the importance of assessing the individual's needs in the vocational rehabilitation process (Obermann, 1965). Today, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, links the assessment of an individual's needs to the planning for all vocational rehabilitation services, and the selection of a specific employment goal. Indeed, an individual cannot be considered to have achieved a successful employment outcome unless the outcome is "consistent with the individual's strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interest, and informed choice", all key elements of assessment (State Vocational Rehabilitation Services, 2001, p. 4411).

Without a good assessment it is likely that the employment plan, job development, job match and facilitation of natural supports will either not be successful or will take a much longer amount of time and money than expected to achieve success. This may be seen in extensive job coaching or employee training services. Unsuccessful work plans may mean that the consumer needs to be employed by a different business with additional on the job training.

Increases in time and money spent pose a burden to everyone involved and underscore the importance of a good assessment. The measurable outcome of a good assessment is always the consumer landing a job.

The Region VI CRP-RCEP recently held a focus group exploring the development of a new training program targeting assessment. The group worked over a two-day period in Dallas, TX, with members coming from Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas. The focus group involved personnel from, and a consumer of, vocational rehabilitation (VR) and CRPs, and was facilitated by staff from the University of North Texas. The purpose was to explore the area of assessment and identify specific skill sets and topics that are important for a quality assessment. The Region VI CRP-RCEP believed that bringing together a diverse group of providers from across the spectrum of employment services for people with significant disabilities in a collaborative manner would yield great results.

The focus group was successful on a number of fronts. Skill deficiencies that currently impact assessments and subsequent employment service activities were identified. The group also agreed that a quality assessment is a series of events rather than a one-time occurrence. Other ideas generated were that the assessment should focus on employment planning and defining needed supports. The assessment also needs to be oriented to the present and the information used should come from a variety of sources. Another tenet of the group was that assess-

ment is only one phase of the overall employment process, and should lead to jobs for people with disabilities.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS**

As more people with disabilities receive services from CRPs, there is a growing need for more knowledgeable and qualified employment specialists. Quality assessments have the ability to speed up the employment process. At the same time they can also reduce the amount of interaction with the employment specialist by identifying and focusing on needed natural supports in the workplace. Finally, quality assessments can reduce costs for the CRP.

The benefits of better trained employment specialists are obvious. Better training allows employment specialists to do their jobs more effectively, resulting in real jobs for consumers. It also allows an agency to focus less time on a specific consumer, and thus serve more people. Rapid placement of individuals with disabilities into jobs has been shown to be an effective way to improve employment rates (Cook, Burke, & Razzano, 2004; Latimer, 2001; Staines et al. 2004).

Ford and O'Brien (2004) stated "increased competence levels of employment specialists will result in an increased perception of professionalism that leads to longer job retention" for employment specialists (p. 2). Lower rates of staff turnover will benefit consumers by assuring CRPs are staffed and ready to work with consumers. The most immediate effect of reduced turnover for a consumer is a decreased chance of losing an employment specialist or job coach, who may be essential for job stability.

Similarly, the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) and APSE: The Network on Employment (formerly called the Association for Persons in Supported Employment) have both developed core competencies for people working in CRPs and supported employment. Both organizations deemed their competencies related to assessment and planning as essential for quality employment services. The focus group created an outline of topical areas that cover the ACRE and APSE competencies. Consumers will ultimately benefit by being assured of high quality services.

## **RELEVANCE FOR CRPS**

Many states are turning to outcome or results-based payment systems. These are also commonly referred to as milestone or benchmark systems.

Often the first tier in the payment system is for a thorough individualized assessment. In order for a CRP to provide timely services and create revenue, the assessment process must be completed in an efficient and effective manner. Furthermore, success with subsequent milestones and benchmarks depends on the quality of the assessment.

Assessment requires a variety of skills. Interviewing and observational skills are vital. Too often providers get in the habit of anticipating what will be said, rather than waiting for the person to actually say it. This leads to assumptions which may be wrong. Employment specialists and others involved with the assessment process should always clarify information gained during meetings and interviews. Words mean different things to different people, so employment specialists need to ensure they are accurately receiving and interpreting the information given by the consumer.

Requirements for community-based assessments necessitate the ability to leave the comforts of the office and conduct assessments "in the field". Conducting observations and assessments outside of the office equalizes the power balance between the employment specialist and consumer. If the observations are conducted in places the consumer enjoys or regularly goes to, ideas for possible job tasks and matches can be created. Conducting good community-based observations requires the observer to be paying attention to a variety of factors as well. Very often what matters in a community-based assessment differs from one consumer to the next. Thus for employment specialists conducting these types of assessments awareness of consumers' specific strengths, goals, needs, wants and dislikes are important. Also transportation, recreational, safety and social interaction issues come into play and are easily incorporated into a community-based assessment. Investigating each of these areas greatly increases the likelihood of success.

At the same time, consumers looking for employment services may arrive with a wide variety of prior assessments, evaluations, diagnostic testing and previous employment histories. Combing through these reports to find useful and valuable information can seem daunting. In addition, many reports may focus on the disability and the limitations it imposes, rather than the possibilities that exist; therefore information gathering is another important skill set in assessment. CRPs need to understand the context in which the report was produced in order to evaluate the utility of the information as it relates to the current employment needs of

the consumer. Typically, evaluations involve meeting some predetermined set of criteria. These criteria may not relate to job skills. Most reports focus on some occurrence in the past, not the future or present. They can be used to get an idea of things that might have worked previously or were not tried.

Facilitating meetings and negotiation skills are essential skill sets. Many agencies now include not only the consumer and the employment specialist, but may also involve previous employers, family members and other significant people in the consumer's life to assist in creating the employment plan. Inclusion of family members is an evidence-based practice (Cook, Burke, & Razzano, 2004; Fesko & Freedman, 1995). Furthermore, involving other people in the process should always occur after the consumer has granted permission to do so. Meetings involving multiple participants with sometimes conflicting agendas require structure and finesse on the part of the facilitator. It is likely that some members of the meeting will disagree about the projected types of job tasks, desired work schedules or potential employers. A good facilitator can use negotiation skills to move past the disagreement and find an outcome that is desirable to all parties, with special regard for the consumer's wishes. This is indeed a difficult skill to master, yet an essential talent to develop.

At the same time, creativity skills play a vital role for assessments and subsequent employment plans. Creativity can transform negative situations and information into positive proactive steps. This is especially true when reviewing prior reports or interviewing people close to the consumer. Many times family members and friends make statements which describe the consumer's inability to perform certain types of job tasks or predict failure. These statements, though negative at first, often convey important information. Reframing the statements to focus on positive aspects opens the door to creative opportunities. Viewing information from a different angle allows the employment specialist to highlight potential strengths or ideas which may have been otherwise missed by focusing on past failures or problems. For example, if a parent says the consumer does not enjoy working alone, we could focus on jobs with group tasks. Another example might be that a person enjoys cleaning, but is very slow and methodical at it. Rather than focusing on how long it takes to get the job done, spotlighting how thorough the work is or the attention to detail can become selling points.

Decision making skills are often an overlooked

component for continuing education training. For a plan to work successfully the employment specialist must have a solid understanding of the impact each decision can have on the consumer as well as the immediate support system. By using a pragmatic decision making model one can anticipate and plan for events which are likely to occur. Accordingly, the employment plan can be adjusted to compensate for likely events as well as allowing contingency plans to be set up for unlikely, but possible ones. Contingency plans are often overlooked but important components of plans. Having one in place allows both the CRP and consumer to still make progress and have a sense of continuity.

## **SUMMARY**

An individualized assessment is a critical step in the employment process. A thorough assessment leads to finding the right job for the consumer, as well as identifying the needed supports for the placement to be successful. Carefully planned individualized assessments have the ability to be both time and cost savers for CRPs, VR staff and consumers.

Assessment requires a unique set of knowledge, skills and abilities. It is included among the core competencies for people working in community rehabilitation programs developed by both the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) and APSE: the Network on Employment. Among the skill sets identified as fundamental to quality and assessments are interviewing skills, report writing, community-based observations, facilitating meetings, negotiation, creativity, and decision-making skills.

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*Meeting the continuing education needs of community rehabilitation providers*

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**Websites & other resources**

ACRE Website National Competencies: [www.acreducators.org](http://www.acreducators.org)

APSE Competencies: <http://www.apse.org/documents/APSESECompetencies.pdf>

Job Accommodation Network: Accommodation Information by Disability: <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/atoz.htm>

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