

New Directions in Vocational Rehabilitation: A "Career Development" Perspective On "Closure"

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Abstract: This article calls for reforms in the state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) program that enable counselors to provide career development services to people with severe disabilities. The thesis is that current VR policies regarding case planning and closure criteria are incompatible with the ongoing career development needs of Americans with disabilities. Recommendations include evaluating client employment outcomes on qualitative criteria, expanding the minimum 90-day time frame between initial job placement and Status 26 case closure, and providing on-the-job consultation regarding productivity barriers and reasonable accommodations.

When leaders in the field of vocational rehabilitation discuss issues that must be addressed in future Amendments of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, they continue to emphasize competitive employment as an end goal of vocational rehabilitation (VR) services for people with severe disabilities. The emphasis on competitive employment represents strong continuity with VR's past. Hershenson (1988, p. 207) illustrated that continuity in a quote he selected from a 1955 publication on the role of the rehabilitation counselor. In the mid-1950's, Hall and Warren (1956) stressed the importance of both competitive employment and career development for people with disabilities: "The counselor is responsible for aiding the disabled individual in securing employment consistent with his capacities and preparation. The counselor also assists the individual in meeting the problem of adjustment and makes follow-up visits as necessary for the vocational adjustment of the individual" (p. 13; as cited in Hershenson, 1988).

The definition of the role of the counselor, circa 1955, is compatible with contemporary themes. The VR counselor must help people with disabilities secure and maintain employment that accords with their aptitudes, interests, and education. But, discussions about employment services for the future reflect a shift in thinking about rehabilitation outcomes from occupational choice to career development. Occupational choice refers to choosing a job at one point in time, whereas career development refers to a life-long process of preparing to choose, choosing, and continuing to choose vocational roles (Szymanski & Hershenson, 1998). The term "career development" and the related service of career counseling are focal points for a number of specific recommendations for changes that are needed in the VR program (Koch & Johnston-Rodriguez, in press; Merz & Harvey, in press; President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, 1990; Roessler & Rumrill, 1995a).

The purpose of this article is to: (a) define "career development" in practical and theoretical terms; (b) identify barriers to career development within VR policies and practices; and (c) suggest changes in those policies to strengthen the career orientation of the VR process.

Personal Career Planning: The Hallmark of Quality Rehabilitation Counseling

In the early 1990s, Sandra Parrino, then chair of the National Council on Disability, recommended that VR discontinue the practice of evaluating counselor effectiveness based on the number of successful (Status 26) case closures (Washington Public Affairs Center, 1991). Instead, she suggested that state agencies evaluate counselors in terms of the overall quality of their performance. Quality counselor performance in the VR process is synonymous with efforts that enable people with disabilities to develop careers and career planning skills, rather than placing clients in entry-level positions (Mullins, 1995; Washington Public Affairs Center, 1991).

The emphasis on "career" in vocational resources used by rehabilitation counselors dates, of course, further back than Parrino's comments. In the second edition of the Guide for Occupational Exploration, Harrington and O'Shea (1984) presented a self-directed strategy for using information about one's interests, work values, and preferred activities at home and school in identifying a vocational goal and developing a preparation and placement plan. In their description of this process, Harrington and O'Shea stressed that appropriate vocational choices for an individual presume affirmative answers to such questions as "Would I like this kind of work well enough to do it as a career?" and "What are my chances of getting higher-level jobs in this field?"

Concurring with the recommendation to stress career and deemphasize the use of current placement and closure criteria, members of the National Leadership Summit Meeting in 1991 advanced the concept of "personal careers" as an important consideration in improving VR services (Washington Public Affairs Center, 1991, p. 8). The scope of the term "personal careers" is defined by selected statements in the Summit Meeting report:

1. A career implies a lifelong process of personal futures planning that is based on the individual's choice to participate.
2. A personal futures plan is based on self-determination principles and self-satisfaction. It is oriented to a personal vision of the future.
3. Career choice is based on informed decision making and work experiences.
4. A career allows for job changes, flexibility, success, and failure, with no minimum or maximum hours of work.
5. A career provides access to quality technology to improve learning, performance, communication, independence, and interdependence.

As described in the Summit Meeting Report, an analysis of personal careers clarifies themes central to the practice of VR counseling, such as lifelong personal futures planning, self-determination, self-satisfaction, informed decision making, job changes, and access to quality technology. Lifelong personal futures planning is directed by the person who is seeking the service (self-determination and self-satisfaction). It is a long-term service designed not only to help the individual select a job consistent with a career path, but also to maintain progress in employment consistent with that

vision. Such progress may require on-the-job accommodations (access to technology) which would enable the person to upgrade his or her vocational capabilities over time (Roessler & Rumrill, 1995; in press). In other words, the concept of "personal careers" is synonymous with career development, as discussed in the vocational psychology literature (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Career development theory provides significant insights into the career counseling services that need to be expanded in the VR program.

A Theoretical Framework for Personal Career Counseling in Vocational Rehabilitation

Career development refers to both a process ("getting ready to choose, choosing, and continuing to choose") and an outcome ("a lifelong sequence of occupationally relevant choices and behaviors") (Szymanski, Hershenson, Enright, & Ettinger, 1996). Skills related to choosing satisfying jobs are viewed as both formative and generalizable, with the person choosing more and more satisfying jobs over time and with practice. Hence, career development services, as applied in VR, should strengthen the person's ability to choose, obtain, and maintain good jobs in accordance with his or her long-term career goals.

Super's Life-Career Rainbow: A Structure for Career Development Services

Super's (1980) Life-Career Rainbow stage model provides a framework for improving career development services in VR. Addressing adult career development, the model consists of five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement or decline. Above all else, the model presents career development as a lifelong, fluid process marked by critical life changes -- changes in priorities, in resources, in motivation, and in ability to perform career-related tasks (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Specifically, tasks related to three stages of Super's model, exploration, establishment, and maintenance, need to be more effectively addressed in the VR program.

Exploration. Tasks of the exploration stage include crystallizing, specifying, and implementing a vocational choice (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). The end result of successful exploration, i.e., implementation of a vocational choice, involves selecting and securing a good job, one that has the potential to become a long-term career. Successful completion of the exploration stage requires the person to examine and compare job options on qualitative criteria, such as compatibility of the job with the person's interests, aptitudes, and training; the job's ability to meet the person's needs for earnings and fringe benefits; and the position's potential for promotion and advancement. If clients do not complete exploration tasks satisfactorily, they may become fixed in secondary labor market positions with little future. The resulting career path resembles a ladder tipped on its side, marked by lateral occupational changes from one entry-level job to another (Roessler & Bolton, 1985).

Establishment. The establishment stage includes the critical tasks of stabilization, consolidation, and advancement in one's position. These three steps are essential in the career development process for people with disabilities. Structuring the establishment stage in another way, Dix and Savickas (1995) described six developmental tasks involved in the establishment cycle: adapting to the organizational culture, achieving a satisfactory level of position performance, relating well to co-workers, maintaining productive work habits, advancing on the job, and making future career plans. Recent research with employed people with disabilities demonstrates the concerns that many

employed people with disabilities have with these establishment tasks (Roessler & Rumrill, 1995, in press; Rumrill, Roessler, Longden, & Schuyler, 1998), and yet vocational rehabilitation counselors are typically not involved in helping the person successfully cope with these establishment challenges. Extended post-employment (i.e., career) services are, thus, needed at the establishment stage.

Maintenance. Tasks of Super's maintenance stage require coping successfully with on-the-job stressors (Crites, 1976) so that the person not only retains (holding on and keeping up), but also advances in (innovating), his or her job (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). On-the-job stressors are both positive, such as opportunities for training and self-development, and negative, such as employer discrimination, physical barriers in the workplace, instances of poor job/person matches, and interpersonal conflicts with one's supervisor or co-workers (Roessler, 1989). As in the establishment stage, extended post-placement follow-up services from VR counselors would increase the probability of positive career outcomes of people with disabilities, especially people dealing with the episodic and unpredictable symptoms of chronic illnesses.

Referring to these establishment and maintenance stages, Hershenson (1996) theorized that the availability of rehabilitation services during the work adjustment (post-placement) process is what makes the career development experience of people with disabilities unique. He noted, "For a person without a disability, only two systems are focal for work adjustment, the person and the work environment. For a person with a disability, however, rehabilitation counselor and rehabilitation services systems are also focal to work adjustment" (Hershenson, 1996, p. 6). Therefore, the rehabilitation system needs to develop mechanisms for providing post-employment services that help

employed people with disabilities cope with the challenges of establishing and maintaining themselves on the job.

People with disabilities share Hershenson's view of the VR system as a major factor in their work adjustment and career development. In a recent needs assessment study with employees who are blind (Rumrill, Roessler, Longden, & Schuyler, 1998), many respondents stated that one of their top priorities was to identify and implement reasonable accommodations that would enable them to keep their jobs. Specifically, they cited the VR system as an important resource with respect to assistive technology, planning for promotion and advancement, and transportation.

In intensive interviews with a small sample of recent college graduates with disabilities, Roessler and Rumrill (1995b) found that even well-trained, successfully employed rehabilitants had major concerns about their prospects for continued career success. As they address establishment and maintenance

stages (i.e., attempt to hold "good jobs"), people with disabilities face post-employment concerns, such as the cost of assistive devices (Rumrill et al., 1998; Scherer, 1990); the implications of changing jobs within the same company (Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997); and access to fringe benefits on the job, fair treatment and pay, and long-term support networks (Roessler & Schriener, 1992; Roessler & Rumrill, 1995b; Rumrill et al., 1997).

Post-VR Outcomes and the Need for Improved Career Development Services

In spite of growing interest in career development services in the VR program (and the stated needs of people with disabilities for those services), outcome studies indicate that the theoretical and practical career development needs of people with disabilities are not being adequately addressed in VR agencies. Studies by Gibbs (1990) and the United States General Accounting Office (1993) have documented the difficulties that VR clients have in maintaining their jobs during the months following initial placement. Although Hershenson (1996) suggested that the availability of rehabilitation services is what differentiates the work adjustment process for people with disabilities from that of people who do not have disabilities, the reality is that VR services cease or dramatically decrease once the client has acquired a job. In fact, Pumpian, Fisher, Certo, and Smally (1997) reported that less than one percent of Rehabilitation Services Administration funds are annually expended on post-employment services.

Recommendations to Improve Post-Employment Outcomes: Redefining Successful Case Closure

Although existing in principle, support for career development services in VR must be strengthened in the policies that govern the Status 26 case closure criteria. Two prominent policy barriers that stand in the way of the counselor providing career development services are (a) the lack of qualitative criteria regarding selection of the employment outcome and (b) the 90-day placement-to-Status-26-closure regulation. As a result, individuals receiving VR-supported counseling and placement services may find themselves in a revolving door of placements, moving from one entry-level position to another with too little post-employment assistance to maintain and advance in their careers.

Specifically, two changes in the policies that govern the Status 26 closure are recommended to encourage delivery of career development services. First, guidelines for the rehabilitation planning process must include criteria reflective of successful resolution of the tasks of the career exploration stage. In other words, the client and the counselor should identify multiple career-oriented employment options and compare those options systematically using qualitative criteria. Examples of these criteria include wage/salary level; number of hours worked per week; level and type of fringe benefits; potential for cross-training and advancement; and compatibility with the person's education, training, and work values. Mandating qualitative closure criteria would make it possible to reinforce counselors not only for the quantity, but also for the quality, of their placement outcomes -- thereby strengthening the career development orientation of the VR process.

Central to the establishment and maintenance stages of career development, the construct of career adjustment (Crites, 1976) -- the process of overcoming thwarting conditions, or barriers, on the job -- provides a rationale for the second recommendation. Specifically, VR counselors must provide more assistance during the time between job placement and case closure than is currently available. These services should be aimed at maximizing the person's self-awareness regarding barriers to productivity and possible reasonable accommodations and at the self-advocacy skills needed for

taking responsibility for one's continued career success. Szymanski, et al. (1996) referred to these services as "post-placement" interventions that may focus on development of the client's work personality and skills and/or on the work environment itself.

At six and twelve month intervals following placement, rehabilitation counselors could conduct structured interviews using the Work Experience Survey (WES; Roessler, 1995) with employed rehabilitation clients. An example of a "post-placement" career adjustment service, WES interviews provide valuable information for employees, supervisors, and counselors to consider.

Specifically, the Work Experience Survey enables employed people with disabilities or chronic illnesses to identify their accommodation needs in four areas: (a) physical access to the worksite, (b) performance of essential job functions, (c) job mastery, and (d) job satisfaction. By expanding the

present minimum 90-day time frame required between job placement and case closure, and by providing interventions designed to assist the person during critical stages of career adjustment (e.g., coping with establishment or maintenance tasks), the VR program can support employed people with disabilities in a manner that is consistent with both career development theory and clients' practical needs as identified in outcome studies.

The need for improved career adjustment/post-employment VR services is clear, but precise and practical mechanisms for delivering these important interventions remain elusive. Who will provide the services? Will they be time-limited, or take the form of ongoing supports? At what point does VR's responsibility for on-the-job services intersect with the employer's obligation to provide reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act? Rumrill and Koch (in press) recommended that VR agencies employ career maintenance specialists -- trained rehabilitation counselors who solely serve the needs of employed clients rather than specializing in specific disability categories (as is often the way that counselor caseloads are structured). They identified a number of services that career maintenance specialists could provide to facilitate the career adjustment process, including (a) consultation with employers on matters of reasonable accommodations, (b) case management in supported employment, (c) self-advocacy training in various areas of employment law, (d) career maintenance clubs, and (e) counseling and guidance for promotion and career advancement.

Conclusion

The move toward "career" and away from "closure" (one person/one job/one point in time) in the VR process represents a much needed change. Furthermore, best practices in the delivery of rehabilitation services must continue to reflect that paradigm shift. The theoretical explanations of career development and the disappointing post-VR employment outcomes reported by rehabilitants compel

disability policymakers to re-examine existing closure criteria and service priorities. Establishing qualitative criteria for planning and evaluation and improving postemployment services will enable the VR process to continue a long tradition of responsive services with a broadened emphasis on career development.

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