

Running Head: SOCIAL JUSTICE

Vocational Evaluation: A Tool for Social Justice

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Abstract

At present vocational evaluators and their services are underutilized by many rehabilitation agencies. This underutilization has caused some to suggest that evaluators take a more independent role. In contrast, this paper suggests another approach which encourages vocational evaluators to become a more integral part of a team effort in order to facilitate social justice by assisting persons with disabilities in their endeavors to attain full integration into society. This approach can be achieved if vocational evaluators reassess their professional identities, their instruments, and their roles both as team players and as advocates for persons with disabilities. The proposed model is suggested as a catalyst for change and as a first step toward integrating professional evaluation services to achieve social justice.

Vocational Evaluation: A Tool for Social Justice

The purpose of this article is to explore the possibilities of facilitating social justice for people with disabilities in the vocational rehabilitation process and in the workplace by making full use of vocational evaluation. Although the vocational rehabilitation system is a result of the legislative process, a review of the progress made in attempting to enforce this legislation makes clear the failure to achieve social justice as defined within the context of the rehabilitation system. As part of a coordinated team effort of the client and all professionals and agencies involved in the rehabilitation process, the vocational evaluator can play a pivotal role in the process of providing persons with disabilities an opportunity for full participation in society. In order for this role to be effective, evaluators need to reevaluate their attitudes, testing instruments, and available technology while accepting the role of team player and disability advocate. The proposed circular model describes a possible method for facilitating a team approach while expanding the goals and possibilities for social change throughout the rehabilitation process.

The Evolution of Working Toward Social Justice for People with Disabilities

Many groups in American society have faced employment discrimination based on stereotyped attitudes regarding their aptitude or fitness for certain vocations. Persons from diverse cultural backgrounds and women have spent a century in the struggle for equal opportunity in the workplace. Persons with disabilities are another group demanding equal employment opportunity as a right of citizenship rather than a hand out offered by a “charitable society”. Civil rights legislation, beginning in the 1960s, guaranteed many groups equal opportunity as a matter of law. Protections were put in place and policies created in an attempt to ameliorate the discrimination faced by those who otherwise had been prevented from entering

the mainstream workplace. It was not until 1990, however, that the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) included people with disabilities in the protections offered to other groups from the 1960s (Smart, 2001).

If one looks at the history of civil rights law and rehabilitation legislation, one can see the evolving attempts to legislate social justice. Social justice has been defined as "...actions that contribute to the advancement of society and advocate for equal access to resources for marginalized...individuals in society." (O'Brien, 2001, p. 1) It is expressed as the need to be assured that every one is given a fair opportunity for full participation. Each act, or amendments to acts, attempted to incorporate a wider variety of disenfranchised groups, plug loopholes, or add definition and refinement to previous legislation, mandate services to those with disabilities, as well as provide continuing research and development of effective practices for inclusion. The 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act also include provisions to enhance client participation in the decision-making applications of the rehabilitation process and encourage client empowerment (Button, 1993; RESNA, 1993; Schroeder, 1998; Weber, 1994).

Despite continuing revisions to protective legislation and attempts to enforce equal opportunity in the workplace, equal opportunity remains an illusive goal. Affirmative action legislation has come under attack and enforcement of the ADA and other protective measures has proven to be minimally effective (Arneson, 2000; Colker, 1999; Hahn, 2003; Illingsworth & Parmet, 2003; Johnson, 2003; NCD, 2000; O'Brien, 2001; Stein, 2003). Assessment of the effectiveness of this legislation in bringing about social change ranges from skeptical to guardedly hopeful (Weber, 1994) or as one author puts it "...a law's intent is only as good as we make it." (RESNA, 1993, p. 1) Despite governmental attempts to level the playing field, attitude cannot be legislated. (Larkin, 2003) As long as stereotypes and prejudices remain in the hearts

and minds of society in general, social justice for excluded groups will continue to prove difficult and disheartening. It appears to be part of human nature that before a change in attitude can take place a person must have experienced, or be shown, hard evidence that his or her traditional outlook on the world is inaccessible and flawed. The successes achieved by minority groups and women have resulted because members of these groups were able to prove, often through affirmative action, that they were capable of performing the tasks required within a variety of positions.

The Importance of a Team Approach

Thomas, in his article *Vocational evaluation in the 21st century: Diversification and independence* suggests that due to the “current downturn in the use of vocational evaluation services by some vocational rehabilitation state agencies,” (p. 783) vocational evaluators must become independent of, and actually compete with, current programs for the limited dollars available in the vocational placement process. This approach seems counterproductive. Considering the needs of persons with disabilities and assessing the array of available rehabilitative services, it seems reasonable in which the evaluator is utilized as a pivotal player would prove more effective in bringing about necessary social change. This team approach requires the united and coordinated efforts of the rehabilitation counselor, the vocational evaluator, and the assistive technology technician. The team’s overall guiding goal would be to achieve social justice through effective job placement and career development of persons with disabilities. Each successful placement creates a ripple effect that includes the person with the disability, his or her family, the employer, peer workers, and eventually the community at large. Successful placement of clients with disabilities will demonstrate (as has employment

opportunities for minorities and women provided through affirmative action) that the skills and abilities of the individual, determine the effectiveness and productivity of the worker.

The Role of the Vocational Evaluator

What, then, is the role of the vocational evaluator in furthering the process of social justice? Early in the 20th century Parsons demonstrated that persons possessing certain traits and characteristics could be matched with jobs in which these traits were deemed necessary for success (O'Brien, 2001). Building on this foundation and Parson's work with individuals without disabilities and individuals with various types of disabilities, vocational guidance and counseling has become part of the fabric of American life, incorporated into schools and a variety of counseling services. Despite this strong foundation and the many ensuing laws that encourage and/or mandate vocational testing, vocational evaluators are underutilized in the vocational rehabilitation process with only 31 percent of clients being referred for evaluation (Langton & Lown, 1995). Persons with disabilities still experience unemployment at a rate far above the national average (O'Brien). In the meantime current literature shows a struggle for vocational evaluators to redefine their role in the rehabilitation process (Groomes, 2004; Power, 2000; Thomas, 1999). However, in order for change to take place and for rehabilitation services to bring about the full integration into society of persons with disabilities, attitudes must change, goals must be refocused, and self-examination and education undertaken. Vocational evaluators are in a unique position to act as a catalyst for this process.

Reducing Personal Bias

Vocational evaluators, in the best tradition of Parsons and other vocational advocates, must become proactive in addressing any issues which have caused doubts about the effectiveness of evaluation services and a decline in their use in job placement and career

development. To do this requires a thorough reevaluation of both the evaluator's role and the evaluation process, beginning with the attitude and approach of the evaluator. First and foremost, the evaluator must be aware of possible inconsistencies in his or her clinical judgments. These judgments are often based on the cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes that are inherent in everyone. Groomes (2004) defines four basic areas to be avoided by both counselors and evaluators in making decisions. These are: judgment heuristics, biases, consumer response, and amount of data. Suggesting that a systematic approach is adopted which avoids, as much as possible, this potential problem in placement. The Rehabilitation Worksheet proposed by Groomes and used for integrating results of assessment instruments offers one of the best ways to avoid identified pitfalls and provides the basis for a coherent, written evaluation. Organizing information in columns and rows to form a matrix and subsequently filling in the details of each box is a logical method to assist the evaluator examine both convergent and divergent information (Groomes).

Evaluation of Instruments

After the evaluator has separated his or her own cultural biases and stereotypes from the evaluative process as much as possible, it is necessary to examine the test and testing procedures themselves. There is a body of evidence that demonstrates that traditional tests, particularly standardized tests, have cultural as well as gender biases and often do not facilitate effective placement practices (Anastasi, 1992). It is important to keep in mind that certain testing pitfalls must be minimized and Anastasi warns that any test only tells us "how well individuals perform at the time of testing, not why they perform as they do." (Anastasi, p. 612) Therefore, careful attention must be paid to which tests are appropriate for each client and vocational evaluators need to stay abreast and updated on testing instruments and their effectiveness in order to

maximize credibility (Anastasi). While section 21 of the 1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act has focused attention on the inclusion of minority groups, Austin suggests that much more work remains in order to bring career testing instruments in line in order to be able to classify "...individuals in terms of ability, personality traits, and vocational interests to determine their fairness to individuals from different cultural backgrounds." (Austin, 1999, p. 3)

It is essential that the vocational evaluator implement the most effective assessment techniques, especially those which include the interaction of the client with the work environment. Community based assessment and ecological assessment must be used as much as possible. "Assessments will primarily address employment issues but will also include other community environments utilized by consumers. These may include training and educational environments...the community... transportation, and living environments." (Sitlington as quoted by Thomas, 1999, p. 785) This dynamic approach will "...offer the evaluator, consumer, employer, teacher, service provider, family, and friends with the information needed to support successful living and enhance quality of life for the consumer with a severe disability." (Thomas, p. 785)

Making Use of Technology

Another evaluation technique that must be incorporated into the evaluation process involves the use of technology. "This is one of the areas of greatest change for evaluators. Just as "cyber-commuters" are changing the complexion of jobs and the workplace, "cyber-evaluations" will make service available to a wider populace." (Thomas, 1999, p. 786) Thomas also suggests that virtual work samples and situational assessments are better suited for assessment in positions requiring high level decision making, environmental interaction, and communication. "Accommodations in learning and performance can be systematically examined

to determine the best possible training strategies, work situations, modifications, technology fit, and supports.” (Thomas, p. 786)

At this point in the evaluation process, the services and expertise of the assistive technology (AT) specialist are vital. Presently AT specialists are underutilized for both evaluation purposes (providing alternative methods for those persons for whom traditional testing is not appropriate) and use of assistive technology within the work place (Langton & Lown, 1995). Use of advanced technology in assessment allows the inclusion of groups who would not otherwise be served, particularly those in rural areas, where services have historically been limited. “In the process of vocational evaluation and recommendations for employment...the vocational evaluator should explore computer adaptations and modifications....Assistive technology is more than just computers, circuit boards, cables, and mechanical devices; it is the integral process of assisting individuals with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, to maximize their human potential.” (Brodwin, Star, & Cardosa, 2004, p. 29) Collaboration between the vocational evaluator and the technology specialist is vital for maximum utilization of this expanding tool.

The Client and Advocacy

Assisting the Client in Job Placement. The client must be an integral part of the placement process and through the process of continuing self-awareness is empowered to make decisions on his or her own behalf. A tool in this process, the use of profiles and portfolios, is one of the most effective ways to ensure informed choice for the client. Introduced and conceptualized by the rehabilitation counselor, the client’s profile and portfolio would include forms on which evaluation participants would record their own results. “The profile would contain essentially the same information that would be included in the evaluation report (e.g.,

skills, aptitudes, interests, values, strengths, needs, goals, plans) but it would be recorded by consumers in their own words and designed exclusively for consumers' own use." (Thomas, 1999, p. 785) In addition, clients should be given a "portfolio to complete throughout the evaluation process so they can learn how to use the collected information in self-assessment, decision-making, and career planning, both now and in the future." (Thomas, p. 785)

Advocacy and Education. With assessment completed and portfolios in place, the evaluator as part of a team must now turn to the education of the broader community. Using O*NET as a basis for exploration of occupational information made available by employers, it now becomes possible to demonstrate to human resources personnel the viability of job placement for clients. O*NET is an extensive computer based system designed to assess jobs in a more complete and holistic manner. It addresses 1,172 occupations, has 445 data elements, and describes jobs at both cross-job and job-specific levels. Jobs are described in terms of skills and knowledge, abilities and interests, training and licensure, generalized work activities and organizational context, as well as salaries and job openings (Havernak, Brodwin, & Kontosh, 1999). By comparing O*NET job evaluations with the results of vocational evaluation, potential employers can be shown that clients are capable of performing successfully within defined parameters. Linking a large national data bank (such as O*NET) with the evaluation results of an individual applicant will greatly reduce the prospective employer's questions and misgivings, many of which are ill-informed. Managers, human resource personnel, and school career counselors may also benefit from seminars in which reports involving the best practices of employment of persons with disabilities have been utilized (Executive Order 13217).

A Long-term Relationship. Initial placement of the client should not be the end of the vocational evaluator's role in furthering the quality of life for persons with disabilities. By

helping the client understand the process of ongoing self-assessment and career planning the evaluator will help the client understand the importance of looking ahead to new possibilities in career-life goals (Thomas, 1999). We live in a changing world and people are not able (nor wish) to remain in one position throughout their lifetime. The vocational evaluator needs to provide open-ended recommendations that emphasize the possibilities for movement up a career ladder and across into other fields. Clients should be encouraged to return to the vocational evaluator as their goals, opportunities, and employment or educational needs change or evolve.

A Model for Social Justice

The proposed circular or spiraling model for a team approach to the rehabilitation process illustrates the major role played by the vocational evaluator (Figure 1). First, the rehabilitation counselor completes the initial intake and determines eligibility. Client goals and expectations are outlined. Next, the rehabilitation counselor begins the process of empowerment by explaining the evaluation and portfolio process and encourages the client by discussing positive options rather than emphasizing limitations. At this point the client is referred to the vocational evaluator who takes into consideration the information received from the rehabilitation counselor and conducts appropriate testing and evaluation. The AT specialist is brought into the process to assist the client with appropriate testing accommodations and to make suggestions as to what other assistive devices might enhance the client's potential for appropriate placement. These results are subsequently discussed with the client, assisting the client to integrate these findings with his or her objectives. The AT specialist might also provide assistive devices for the client to explore in areas as diverse as work or recreation. Working collaboratively, the rehabilitation counselor, the vocational evaluator, the assistive technology specialist, and the client make recommendations for placement. Finally, the rehabilitation counselor serves as a liaison between

the client and the potential employer, filling any gaps in the natural job networking system because these natural networking systems are not available to persons with disabilities or to those who live in poverty.

It is hoped that this core team will eventually expand to include human resource specialists, school counselors, and managers acting as agents for change in facilitating, not just inclusion of persons with disabilities, but their full participation in society and the attainment of the ultimate goal--quality of life. In order to accomplish both the team approach in which the vocational evaluator is an equal professional partner and the goal of the highest quality of life for everyone, moral values as promulgated in the code of ethics must merge with a practical professional framework. The vocational evaluator, rehabilitation counselor, and assistive technology specialist can all serve as agents of change, creating a professional synergy. In this way, rehabilitation professional can serve as catalysts in the search for social justice.

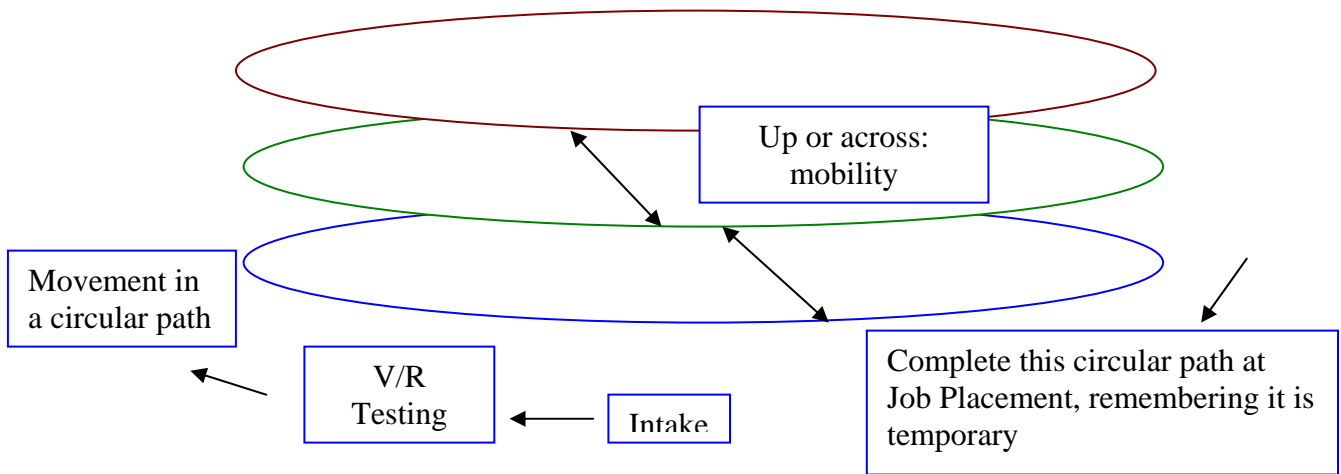


Figure 1. This model demonstrates the circular process from intake to job placement, linked to the circular patterns that are career changes throughout a lifetime that might be above (promotions, or accepting positions of increased responsibility in other organizations) or below (involuntary moves) and even across different fields of employment, or different employers.

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