

Current and future challenges in vocational rehabilitation

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We are pleased to add our commentary to those of our distinguished colleagues. Indeed, the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* has come a long way in the past 20 years. Subscribers and contributors come from every discipline in healthcare and human services and from many countries and cultures. We know from experience that subscribers read this journal and endeavor to translate the findings and innovations contained therein. Between us we have published 19 manuscripts in *JVR*, and have reviewed scores of manuscripts as members of the Editorial Board. We have always been impressed with the range of ideas, the quality of submissions, and the potential for knowledge translation that each article promises. This is a journal for working professionals who labor in the vineyard of vocational rehabilitation (VR) in every conceivable service delivery system: community based rehabilitation programs, the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program, veterans rehabilitation, industry based disability management, employee assistance programs, case management settings, school-to-work

transition programs, special education, employer networks, and more. Readers and contributors include rehabilitation counselors, rehabilitation psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, policy makers, labor economists, disability management specialists, transition specialists, job coaches, administrators, work evaluators, job placement specialists, occupational health nurses and physicians, physiatrists, life care planners and a variety of other allied health and human services professionals.

At this point in our history, the challenges of vocational rehabilitation have never been more evident, nor has the need for more and better VR services been greater. According to the World Health Organization World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011), there are more than one billion people in the world living with some form of disability and of whom nearly 200 million experience considerable difficulties in functioning. Consider our current situation in the United States where 13.6 million Americans receive social security disability benefits, with 7.6 million receive SSDI, 4.0 million SSI, and 1.6 million both. In 2010, the trust fund for SSDI took in \$93 billion for these programs, and paid out \$124 billion. The trust fund for disability payments will be exhausted in 6 years. Another \$48 billion was paid for SSI in 2010 which comes from general revenue funds. That's \$172 billion for indemnity payments plus approximately \$150 billion for medical assistance. Add to this another 3 million veterans on V.A. disability indemnity payments (\$30 billion) plus medical care.

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No council of economic advisers is needed to inform us that these commitments are not sustainable, nor can they be entirely justified given our technological means to educate and employ a substantial portion of these 16.6 million Americans. (Note: None are included in official unemployment estimates).

Despite landmark legislation that has rendered workplace discrimination unlawful, labor force participation of working age Americans with disabilities continues to linger. Only 5.7 million people with disabilities participate in a workforce exceeding 130 million. As published in JVR recently, the adverse impact of the recession was about 1/3 worse for working age Americans with disabilities on most measures of unemployment and underemployment (Fogg, Harrington & McMahon, 2011). Vocational rehabilitation professionals must be familiar with labor market information, job requirements, and employer demands to help consumers develop appropriate vocational goal consistent with their job performance and capacity early in the VR process.

Employment demand is changing and projected to shift due to fundamental structural economic changes [1]. The organizational structures of American companies are also changing. The organizational chart is now flatter and more team based, and the emphasis is on flexibility, productivity, and workplace socialization skills. Therefore, VR professionals must have a thorough understanding of the real concerns of employers about hiring and retention of persons with disabilities and be able to address their concerns and needs. Helping people with disabilities develop flexible, versatile, and adaptable work skills to meet employer expectations, and requirements for jobs in the new economy will improve their odds of obtaining employment. Employers are less risk averse in occupations where the demand is high and the supply of qualified workers is low. Preparing people with disabilities for these occupations will increase their chance of being hired. As a result, demand-side employment approach is gaining considerable attention in VR.

Given this climate, has evidence-based vocational rehabilitation ever been more important? Has the translation of knowledge for high quality research findings ever been more necessary? If we do not contribute to JVR as researchers, editors, reviewers and consumers of research to address these enormous challenges, then who will?

Here are some research directions that hold promise for improving the current situation.

- Robert Fraser and colleagues [2] have recently completed a study of employer intentions to hire which provide enormous insights into how employers truly perceive prospective applicants with disabilities. Their innovative methodology has provided a level of candor that allows us to customize our demand-side job placement efforts to be more successful, in large part driven by the size of a particular employer. A complementary and compelling study will soon be released by Stephen Kay (in press).
- The National EEOC ADA Research project [5] has now generated over 60 articles in print which begin to document the nature and scope of disability discrimination in America. While not a prohibitive barrier to labor force participation, targeted interventions are now possible which, if implemented, can dramatically reduce the phenomenon of reported discrimination in a very efficient manner.
- An overhaul of the social security disability system must include a new definition of “work disability” which allows for the legally required reasonable accommodations that can minimize if not eliminate the presumption of incapacity [4]. Employment practices are lagging decades behind the current potential of assistive technology, rehabilitation engineering, and ergonomics and the “lag time” is growing incrementally larger with each year. If yesterday there existed an economic reason for employing an SSI or SSDI recipient, the cost benefit of doing so today has increased substantially. Is it time to require cooperation with a mandatory program of vocational rehabilitation for disability payment recipients? Will VR counselors have a role in the identification of waste, fraud and abuse in the SSA system?
- As “don’t ask, don’t tell” becomes a matter of military and political history, it is time to address the systematic exclusion of millions of Americans from the option to serve in the U.S. military. Indeed there are hundreds of military classifications in which, given reasonable accommodations, young men and women with disabilities could perform safely and productively and in so doing could benefit from one of the most reliable means of skill-building, access to higher education, career and leadership development, service to country, self-esteem, and escape from poverty in the 235 year history of America. Again, the return on

investment from obviating the disability support systems provide an added social dividend. Is the U.S. military ready for a world class disability management or “at will” recruitment program?

Never has VR been more important to our social and economic well being. Never has funding for evidence based practices such as supported employment, disability management, and demand-side job placement been more necessary. And never has a knowledge translation vehicle such as *JVR* been more timely.

References

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