Improving job tenure outcomes for people with disabilities: the 3M model

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The need for job retention services in rehabilitation is clearly indicated in statistics on unemployment and job loss rates for people with disabilities. In this article, information is provided on a three-part job retention model (the 3M model) containing the constructs of match, maturity, and mastery. The thesis of the article is that individuals with disabilities are more likely to retain employment when rehabilitation counselors provide retention services compatible with the 3Ms. Counselors can help people with disabilities (a) establish the prerequisite job-person match, (b) meet career maturity challenges, and (c) demonstrate mastery of novel workplace problems.

Job tenure is a major concern in rehabilitation for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, people with disabilities are still unemployed at rates far exceeding those of the general population. According to the 2000 Harris Poll results reported by the National Organization on Disability (Louis Harris and Associates, 2000), 71% of adults with disabilities in the United States are unemployed, compared to only 20% of the general population. People with disabilities experience this employment differential for several reasons, including discrimination in hiring and difficulties in job retention. Improving job retention strategies in rehabilitation thus is one important way to reduce the overall unemployment of people with disabilities.

The difficulties that people with disabilities encounter in retaining employment are evident in many years of rehabilitation research. In a follow-up study, Roessler and Bolton (1985) reported that about 50% of the rehabilitation clients in the sample were not working because of inadequate job performance or poor work adjustment. Gibbs' (1990) research on job retention outcomes for vocational rehabilitation clients indicated that 25% of approximately 2,500 successful rehabilitants were no longer employed 3 months following closure. Of even greater concern, approximately 50% were not employed 12 months following closure.

Job retention services in rehabilitation are also important because of the direct relationship between employment and quality of life (Roessler & Rubin, 1998). Research clearly indicates that satisfaction with life and self-perceived productivity are related to employment and income level (Mehnert, Krauss, Nadler, & Boyd, 1990; Salkever, 2000). Because rehabilitation professionals are dedicated to improving the quality of life of their clients, they know that it is necessary to help people with disabilities cope with problems and challenges on the job so that they do not run the risk of losing employment.

The importance of a career-development service for individuals with disabilities is illustrated through a case study of a woman with multiple sclerosis (MS) who worked as a data analyst. In an on-the-job interview with a rehabilitation professional, this woman identified a host of physical access and work condition barriers that were threatening her job tenure. For example, she could not open the front door because it was too heavy; she worked on the 21st floor of an office building, and no one

had developed and discussed evacuation plans with her; and she was often too hot, usually during the winter months. She also experienced disability-related effects on her job performance, such as physical limitations that affected her ability to work 8 hours, handle papers, and use a standard keyboard. She reported deficiencies in immediate, short, and long-term memory; interpersonal judgment; thought processing; and reasoning. She expressed frustration with tasks such as completing repetitive or fast-paced work, working under pressure to meet deadlines, and working under conditions of fluctuating building temperatures (too hot or too cold) and noise levels. Her job-mastery concerns included not knowing what was expected of her or what to do to advance in the company.

Facing these multiple unresolved barriers, this employee with MS was very dissatisfied with her job. After talking with her for only a short time, the rehabilitation professional feared that she would soon leave her job because of her mounting tension caused by the presumably intractable thwarting conditions. The worker was unsure about what actions to take and which procedures to follow to identify such actions so that she could reduce her anxiety and remove her workplace barriers. This case study clearly illustrates how disability and job factors can overwhelm a person to the extent that the easiest response becomes one of voluntarily terminating employment.

CAREER ADAPTABILITY' THE 3M MODEL

As is evident in the case study and in the preceding discussion of job tenure rates, the capability of people with disabilities to adapt to on-the-job barriers and challenges is one of the keys to job retention. Some have used the terms career adaptability (Cochran, 1990; Goodman, 1994) or career adaptation (Power & Hershenson, 2001) to describe this capacity. Viewed from the perspective of retention of and progression in a position, career adaptability is composed of three critical constructs, each beginning with the letter M; hence, this approach is called the 3M model of job retention. Job retention is a function of match, maturity, and mastery. The match construct is a prerequisite for career adaptability because it refers to the proper fit between a person and a job, as described in the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis, 1996). The maturity construct refers to meeting the developmental or expectable challenges that unfold with time on the job. The mastery concept pertains to the day-to-day problems that occur in the workplace that thwart one's career motives and threaten job retention.

Match Component

The match component addresses the issue of job-person fit. Employers and rehabilitation professionals stress that an appropriate job-person match is a prerequisite to improving job retention outcomes (Buys & Rennie, 2001). According to the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment, job retention is the function of two indicators of job-person match or correspondence--satisfactoriness and satisfaction. Satisfactoriness occurs when the person possesses and uses the skills needed to meet job demands. Satisfaction occurs when the job provides the types of activities and reinforcers that the person prefers. Thus, employees who stay with jobs are good at what they do (satisfactory) and like what they are doing (satisfied).

Lack of correspondence, on the other hand, typically results in two outcomes, both of which are

direct threats to job retention. Employees who cannot meet critical job demands are considered unsatisfactory by their employers. Ultimately, employers terminate unsatisfactory employees. If employees are not participating in preferred activities or receiving desired reinforcers on the job, they become dissatisfied with their work. Ultimately, employees who are not happy in their work voluntarily leave the workplace. Without correspondence, or a good job-person match, individuals do not maintain their employment. Job-person match is therefore a necessary element of career adaptability and a prerequisite to job tenure.

Match models are silent, however, on two critical questions related to the dynamics of job tenure:

1. What are the predictable (i.e., expectable) on-the-job challenges that a person must meet over time in order to advance in a position?

2. How can the person learn to cope more effectively with unpredictable day-to-day problems that occur at work?

These two issues are addressed in the other two components of the career adaptability model.

Maturity Component

In his depiction of the career development process from exploration to retirement, Donald Super (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) described the maturing process that workers undergo as they confront expectable tasks involved in the career development stages of establishment and maintenance. The hallmark of "mature" workers is their ability to skillfully meet these postchoice or postmatch challenges of career development. For workers who succeed in demonstrating such maturity, the reward is often far more than job tenure: They are the employees singled out for advancement and promotion.

Occurring between the ages of 25 and 44 (Super et al., 1996), the expectable challenges of establishment include (a) stabilizing or "making one's place in the organization secure by assimilating the organizational culture and performing job duties satisfactorily," (b) consolidating or "demonstrating positive work attitudes and productive habits along with cultivating good co-worker relations," and (c) advancing or "'getting ahead' by climbing to higher-level positions in the organization" (p. 133). In their research, Dix and Savickas (1995) linked two expectable job retention tasks to each of the three periods of job establishment as follows:

1. stabilization--adapting "to the organizational culture and achieving a satisfactory level of position performance,"

2. consolidation--relating "effectively to coworkers and maintaining productive work habits," and

3. advancement--moving "toward the next promotion within the current organization and planning future career moves, including reflection about changing organizations or field" (p. 94).

Dix and Savickas used this task analysis of career establishment to conduct a critical incident study with 50 successful men from a diverse range of occupations who possessed the tacit knowledge required to establish themselves in their positions. As a result of their research, Dix and Savickas identified the behaviors that participants used to cope with the six tasks of the three establishment periods.

Dix and Savickas' (1995) research identified a mentoring or "career coaching" agenda to enhance the maturity and thus career adaptability of people with disabilities. Arrayed across the six tasks of the three developmental periods of establishment, this agenda includes 31 classes of coping responses, and each class is elaborated in terms of sample behaviors. For example, the developmental task of organizational adaptability includes the coping response "learn from experts," which occurs as a result of behaviors such as "query[ing] experts," "listen[ing] to advice," and "learn [ing] from experienced subordinates" (p. 100). The developmental task of co-worker relations consists of five coping responses, such as "tak[ing] time to listen," which requires the following: "listen[ing] more than you talk," "attend[ing] to co-workers' needs," and "focus[ing] on non-verbal communications" (p. 101).

Expanding the understanding of challenges workers encounter beyond the establishment stage, Williams and Savickas (1990) completed research pertaining to the maintenance phase. They identified the career maintenance concerns of 75 male and 60 female managers, who ranged in age from 35 to 64, in the field of health care. Findings from this study clarified the types of proactive responses that mature workers make to expectable concerns of career maintenance. Five categories of concerns were closely allied with the developmental tasks involved in the maintenance phase. Each concern category (i.e., keeping up with new developments, technology, advances, and changes; clarifying future directions and goals and planning accordingly; making the effort to hold on to one's current position; setting and attaining continuing education goals; shifting focus on the job by developing new ideas, expanding responsibilities, and/or assuming administrative or management tasks) is readily translated into objectives for a career maintenance mentoring or coaching approach.

Both theory and research indicate that predictable challenges occur during the establishment and maintenance phases of career development. Meeting these predictable challenges successfully helps people with disabilities demonstrate maturity on the job and capitalize on the previously described job-person match that is a prerequisite to job tenure. Still, this developmental approach does not address the unexpected day-to-day problems and obstacles that people with disabilities encounter at work (Crites, 1982). In fact, neither the match (i.e., establishing the prerequisite job-person correspondence) nor the maturity (i.e., meeting the developmental challenges inherent in job incumbency) concepts encompass the unexpected on-the-job barriers that arise due to such factors as interpersonal conflicts or disability-related performance problems. The mastery concept thus is required to describe the skills needed to cope with the idiosyncratic problems arising daily in the workplace.

Mastery Component

The mastery component concentrates on how people with disabilities adjust to inevitable but unpredictable problems on the job that often result from disability factors such as pain, fatigue,

functional limitations, or weakness. Examples of task demands that may exceed personal resources include the specific requirements of getting into, around, and out of the workplace; performing essential functions of the job itself; and satisfying company policies regarding work schedules, sick leave, or time off for medical appointments. Gulick (1992) described how people with MS solved job retention problems related to these factors by using problem-solving or work-enhancing strategies such as seeking less physically demanding work in more accessible sites; requesting more flexible company policies regarding work hours, breaks, and sick leave; adapting existing equipment or securing new equipment; and making alterations to the physical environment. Obviously, resolving unexpected problems on the job requires the ability to define problems accurately, generate feasible options, select the most practical option, and implement the steps required to solve the problem.

JOB RETENTION INTERVENTIONS

Improving the job retention rates of people with disabilities requires the use of many types of interventions that one may organize in relation to the 3M model. In the initial phases of the employment process, rehabilitation counselors use match strategies leading to better retention rates when they help people with disabilities identify and acquire positions in which correspondence exists between needs and activities and skills and requirements. Maturity strategies for improving job retention outcomes require rehabilitation counselors to help people with disabilities learn the skills needed to satisfy the expectable challenges of the career development stages of establishment and maintenance. Counselors may involve employees with disabilities in employer-sponsored employee development programs such as career coaching or mentoring to develop such skills. Via employer staff-development programs or counselor-directed support groups, rehabilitation counselors can help employees with disabilities develop the problem-solving skills they need to master (i.e., reduce or remove) barriers to job retention.

Match

To improve the match between a worker with a disability and the job, rehabilitation professionals must apply vocational evaluation information and career counseling techniques using the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment as a framework. Using vocational evaluation and occupational information, rehabilitation counselors help individuals clarify their vocational interests and aptitudes as well as the demands and activities of a variety of jobs in the local economy. Counselors help people with disabilities identify job goals; evaluate the potential for correspondence in those job goals, including the need for job accommodations (Szymanski & Hershenson, 1998); select a feasible vocational objective; develop a plan to achieve that goal; and implement the employment plan (Buys & Rennie, 2001).

Maturity

The competence or social skills model is an excellent job retention intervention for helping people with disabilities meet maturational challenges in work, as identified by Dix and Savickas (1995) and Williams and Savickas (1990). For example, rehabilitation counselors could help workers with disabilities adopt behaviors compatible with career establishment demands, such as becoming more proficient (e.g., enroll in training, read information on job functions and products, analyze and learn

from mistakes), or with career maintenance demands, such as establishing career goals (e.g., examine personal desires, seek advice from others, develop a long-range plan).

The competence model is also particularly appropriate when experience indicates that certain types of problems will occur frequently. For example, workers with chronic illnesses and severe disabilities will encounter the need for job accommodations throughout their work lives. Rehabilitation counselors could help workers with disabilities learn the behaviors that have a high probability of resolving these expectable challenges (Scherich, 1996). Roessler and Rumrill (1995) described how employees with disabilities should approach their supervisors to discuss needs for job accommodations. They presented preparatory behaviors, such as identifying the problem and type of accommodation needed, as well as specific request skills, such as asking for the supervisor's opinion about accommodations. Palmer and Roessler (2000) took this approach one step further by describing the negotiation behaviors required (e.g., specifying the problem, reflecting employer concerns, collaborating in solution identification) when two parties cannot agree.

Mastery

Another important theme in the career adaptation literature underscores the importance of helping employees with disabilities cope with the developmental challenges and novel problems encountered in the workplace. D'Zurilla and Nezu's (1999) problem-solving training (PST) is one approach to teaching individuals how to cope effectively with on-the-job challenges and stressors. Their PST program addresses four primary problem-solving functions: (a) problem definition and formulation, (b) generation of alternative solutions, (c) decision making, and (d) solution implementation and verification. They called for wider use of PST in the workplace so that employees can exercise more initiative in solving their own problems.

> Hence, it is possible that preventive PST programs might enable managers and other employees to more effectively resolve the daily work problems that lead to poor job performance, high job stress, absenteeism, accidents, and burnout. If successful, such programs could have major economic and health benefits for society. (p. 217)

In a program entitled Vocational Coping Training (VCT), Roessler and Johnson (1990) provided problem-solving training for individuals with disabilities. Their approach used the acronym SOAR to help participants remember the following four steps required to respond more appropriately to challenges and problems in the work setting:

1. Define the Situation.

2. Identify your Options.

3. Anticipate the outcomes of each response.

4. Respond in a manner that is within your abilities, fair to others, and fair to you.

The problem-solving training in VCT is compatible with O'Driscoll and Cooper's (1996) findings regarding the value of problem-focused coping in the workplace.

Most problem-solving models are highly rationalized strategies for identifying, implementing, and evaluating integrative responses. Advocating a more intuitive approach, Gelatt (1991) described how to apply the principle of positive uncertainty and other paradoxical principles in problem solving to generate creative solutions. His approach to intuitive problem solving is evident in such questions as, "Have you ever found it an advantage not to know something?" "Have you ever found wishful thinking to be an advantage?" and "Do you find it easier to be the result of the past than the cause of the future?"

Teaching people with disabilities how to solve problems in both rational and intuitive styles is compatible with a career mastery intervention suggested by Gulick (1992). She recommended that counselors introduce employees with disabilities to the stress-coping model and the multiple factors and processes that affect stress-coping outcomes on the job. By becoming familiar with the components and operation of the stress-coping model (i.e., environmental resources/stressors, personal dispositions, stressful event, appraisal, coping, outcome; Moos & Swindle, 1990), workers with disabilities could appreciate the ways in which stress appraisal and alternative coping strategies affect behavior and life outcomes. Most important, they could understand the importance of direct action coping strategies that call for early and effective use of work-enhancing strategies such as making environmental adjustments, installing adaptive equipment, and securing social support for task performance and emotional reasons. Furthermore, they could learn how disability factors (e.g., type, severity, duration of symptoms), personal dispositions (e.g., sense of humor, hope), and environmental stressors or supports (e.g., social support, financial pressures) influence coping outcomes (Gulick, 1992; Moos & Swindle, 1990).

JOB RETENTION INTERVENTIONS: A POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPERATIVE

Using the analogy of the "dental model," Goodman (1994) stressed that individuals need help with job retention throughout their lives, just as they need regular dental checkups. This need for long-term periodic checkups is particularly true for employed people who are coping with chronic illnesses and disabilities such as MS, arthritis, spinal cord injury, and severe mental illness, to name a few. Because of exacerbations or emergencies, these chronic conditions continually alter the job-person relationship. Long-term on-the-job support would help employees with such conditions meet the challenges and solve the problems related to job retention before those situations cause the person to lose hope of being able to work (Rumrill & Roessler, 1999).

Goodman (1994) indicated that career challenges and problems are a natural part of the midcareer experience and are often the result of interpersonal conflicts; efforts to maintain job satisfaction; and, as noted, chronic illness and disability-related symptoms. Cochran (1990) stated that individuals realize they are dealing with a career challenge or problem when their current course of action "signals a qualitative difference between possible career futures. A person seeks career counseling when current courses of action indicate that a course of life has gone, is going, or is threatened with going off course, indicating a gap between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'" (p. 207). In cases where lines of intention diverge from lines of action, Cochran calls for intensive career counseling, much in

the spirit of the 3M model. Through such interventions, rehabilitation counselors can enhance the person's sense of agency and personal control, powerful forces the individual can direct toward the challenges and problems associated with retaining and advancing in employment.

CONCLUSIONS

For many good reasons, job retention for people with disabilities is a high priority concern in rehabilitation. First, employment statistics, whether they address the overall employment rate of people with disabilities or their ability to stay at a job over time, document the need for more intensive job retention efforts in rehabilitation. Second, job retention is directly related to the quality of life reported by adults with disabilities. Third, prominent career theories such as the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment identify improved job tenure rates for people with disabilities as a primary objective for rehabilitation services.

To improve job retention outcomes for employees with disabilities, rehabilitation professionals must identify the critical factors affecting retention outcomes and develop and implement appropriate interventions. In this article, the 3M model--match, maturity, and mastery--offers a comprehensive discussion of the factors affecting retention. The match approach stresses the importance of correspondence between (a) the aptitudes of the person and the demands of the job and (b) the preferences of the person and the activities and reinforcers of the job. Traditional vocational evaluation and rehabilitation counseling strategies have an important role to play in creating correspondent job-person relationships. A good job-person match is a prerequisite to improving job tenure.

The maturity and mastery concepts, however, introduce two other considerations with respect to job retention outcomes for workers with disabilities. On one hand, rehabilitation professionals can help individuals with disabilities become more mature workers by helping them to identify predictable demands of the establishment and maintenance phases of employment and to acquire appropriate coping strategies in response to them. Because rehabilitation professionals cannot anticipate all of the problems that workers with disabilities will encounter, they must also help them master myriad career problems stemming from both idiosyncratic job settings and personal factors. To reduce or remove the tension associated with the barrier and the barrier itself, employees with disabilities must learn the problem-solving skills needed to solve problems themselves.

The 3M model offers rehabilitation professionals a useful structure for understanding and implementing job retention interventions for people with disabilities. It also offers a clear agenda for future research. For example, to what extent are individuals with disabilities securing positions consistent with their skills and preferences through vocational rehabilitation services, and is job-person compatibility related to levels of satisfaction, satisfactoriness, and tenure? Are career mentoring interventions effective in helping workers with disabilities learn the cognitive and behavioral skills needed to meet career maturity challenges and master on-the-job problems? What are the best models for such instructional and mentoring programs, and how can they be offered at the workplace? Do skill gains in such programs relate to improved levels of satisfactoriness, satisfaction, and tenure? Finally, does problem-solving training improve the productiveness of employees with disabilities and, most important, their job retention rates? Positive answers to these questions attest to the real value of the 3M approach to job retention.

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