

Assessing Employment Readiness

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Introduction

The provision of career development and employment programs is increasingly being privatized and agencies delivering employment and career services need to account to provincial government funders against measurable outcomes. Consistent and objective measurement of clients before and after interventions and the ability to aggregate data across clients and service providers can offer powerful information for accountability and program planning. The ultimate objective is being able to successfully place clients into long term, fulfilling employment. This article is about the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) assessment tool and ERS' Canadian data results.

Defining and Measuring Employment Readiness

Alberta's economy is adjusting to the dramatic fall in oil prices and the loss of jobs in the Oil & Gas sector. Career development and employment service agencies are doing their part to empower clients and move them off income assistance or employment insurance and into meaningful, productive employment. In order to do this, service providers need to have a clear understanding of what makes a difference in employment readiness and what programming they need to provide.

Based on extensive field testing and validation, the conceptual model underlying the ERS has been shown to provide a valid and comprehensive model of employment readiness. That model defines employment readiness as being able, with little or no outside help, to find and keep an appropriate job as well as to be able to manage transitions to new economic sectors as needed. It includes three sets of factors - soft skills, employability factors, and challenges.

1. Soft Skills:
 - Career decision-making, or knowing what type of work suits you
 - Skills enhancement, or having the skills for the work you want
 - Job search, or having the skills to find work
 - Job maintenance, or having the skills to keep work once found
 - Ongoing career management, or being able to manage work transitions
2. Employability Factors:
 - Self-efficacy, or a sense of being able to perform well
 - Outcome expectancy, or whether or not a client expects to succeed
 - Social supports, or the client's network and ability to get help
 - Work history, or the client's previous work success
3. Challenges:
 - Personal challenges, or stresses a client can address on their own
 - Environmental challenges, or responsibilities with which clients need help
 - Systemic challenges, or stresses from physical or attitudinal barriers in our community

While agencies do not control the job market and can make little difference if employers are not hiring, their performance can be measured by whether their clients become employment ready. Because the ERS has been validated for repeat administrations, it can be used to measure change in clients as a result of agency interventions and thus to demonstrate whether agencies have assisted clients in becoming employment ready.

The Majority of Clients Have More Than Job Search Issues

Although many programs are intended simply to help clients develop a resume and search for a job, data from assessments using the ERS with over 170,000 Canadian clients indicate that the vast majority need assistance with more than job search. The 2019 report shows that 65 percent of all clients taking the ERS initially were “not ready”, meaning that they had at least three employment readiness factors on which they needed assistance in order to become successfully employed. Research has shown that, if such clients do not get the assistance needed, they have only a 40 percent chance of obtaining employment within 12 weeks, with a high probability of losing that job (Ward and Riddle 1999, 2001). On their first take of the ERS, only 15 percent of clients tested indicated that they were already “fully ready” to benefit from job placement and equipped to retain a new job.

The data indicates that successful employment assistance programs need to address a range of employability issues beyond job search, including ongoing career management, career decision-making, skills enhancement, work history, social supports, and self-efficacy.

Addressing only job search skills could be a waste of public funds for 85 percent of clients if those programs are not supplemented with assistance in the other areas where clients lack employment readiness skills.

Addressing Multiple Factors Pays Off

Research shows that just being self-sufficient in soft skills and employability dimensions are not enough (Ward and Riddle 1999, 2003). Most clients face a number of barriers or challenges that act as stressors and can be incapacitating if not managed well. Clients facing significant challenges without assistance are likely to fail at work even if they are successful in getting a job. So, all three parts of the Employment Readiness model are equally important to client success.

The ERS provides agencies with the opportunity to code employment status after assistance and link it to the employment readiness status of the client. This allows agencies to test whether or not assistance beyond job search or job placement is worthwhile. For agencies using this coding option, the following results were demonstrated. Clients who tested “not ready” had a greater than 70 percent successful placement rate within 12 weeks, while clients who tested “minimally ready” (i.e., just needing assistance with job search) had a greater than 95 percent successful placement rate. These data indicate that, in the long run, it is cost effective to invest the time and resources in helping clients address employment readiness factors other than simply job search skills.

Current Programs Do Affect More Than Job Search Skills

For clients who took the ERS both before and after interventions, the post-intervention results showed over 25 percent improvement on five of the factors. Not surprisingly, the factor on which clients showed the most improvement was job search skills, as 86 percent of the clients needed assistance with job search and job search was a primary focus of most interventions. Other factors showing significant improvement included ongoing career management, career decision-making, and social supports. The improvement in career decision-making was particularly heartening to see as, without a career focus, it is difficult for clients to sustain the effort to learn new skills and to accommodate the demands of a new employer.

All Clients Need Help with Challenges

The top three challenges reported by clients were believing that they didn't have enough education (64%), believing that they did not have enough money to survive without assistance (58%), and, lack of affordable housing (44%). The last statistic suggests that, if clients were to obtain employment, their ability to maintain that employment could be compromised by inability to access affordable housing.

Even Older Clients Need Supervised Work Experience

One of the key predictors of success in work life is previous work experience. While 78 percent of persons under 25 years of age reported that they had not yet had a successful work experience, surprisingly 67 percent of workers over the age of 45 also reported the same thing. Of particular concern regarding older workers is the 76 percent who indicated that they did not have a social network to support them in their work life and in finding a new job. Under present programs administered by agencies using the ERS for post-intervention testing, only 10 percent of clients improved their experience with work. These data indicate that relevant authorities may find that apprenticeship programs, job coach programs, internships, and other programs providing extra supervision could be a good investment of public funds.

Ongoing Career Management Skills Can Prevent Recycling

Most clients are not concerned with issues beyond getting a job; however, 88 percent of them demonstrate that they did not have the skills to manage transitions between jobs. Since most persons are likely to have at least six different jobs or careers, an inability to manage transitions (i.e., ongoing career management skills) will mean a high probability of cycling back onto public assistance. If EI recipients were "...able self-reliantly to manage their work and learning opportunities and to move from one work role to another as needed, EI payments would decrease".

Conclusions

The effectiveness of career development agencies in quantifiably improving the employment readiness of clients has a direct impact on the savings generated by government. Importantly, it improves the social well-being of clients. To be effective, agencies need to be able to quickly assess the employment readiness needs of their clients, address the full range of needs either directly or through referrals, and objectively measure the success of their programs for clients.

Government-funding models encourage agencies to find the quickest route to employment for clients. This does not always provide the client with the employment readiness skills to manage their work life successfully on a long-term basis. An outcome based employment assessment followed by appropriate intervention(s) is what's required for clients' ultimate success.



Additional information on the ERS can be found at ERSScale.com or email at ersinfo@employmentreadines.org.

Adapted from a paper by Ward, V.G. and D.I. Riddle, D. Lloyd "Measuring Employment Readiness".

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