Measuring the Impact of Career Services: Current and Desired Practices

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Measuring the Impact of Career Services: Current and Desired Practices

It is commonly accepted that career development services help people manage and make effective decisions about education, training, and work. They are able to act upon their passions and talents to become more motivated learners/workers, stay in the workforce longer, have reduced levels of workplace stress, and be less marginalized in society. These services contribute to social and economic outcomes related to increased employment opportunities, improved quality of life, social inclusion, and a more vibrant, dynamic economy. Although the benefits seem obvious to many, more evidence is needed to demonstrate the direct and indirect impact of career development services.

In 2003, Canadian practitioners, policy makers, and employers participated in two symposia: the HRSDC-OECD Career Guidance and Public Policy symposium and the Working Connections: A Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development, Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development. A theme emerging from both symposia highlighted the need to develop better systems for evaluating career development services and use the evaluation data to inform public policy regarding individuals, families, organizations and society. A literature review of evaluation in career development services suggested there is a need for: (a) greater demonstrated knowledge regarding the value and impact of career development services (Roest & Magnusson, 2004), (b) cost-benefit analyses of these services (Herr, 2003), (c) more precise efficacy assessments of career counselling (Hiebert, 1994), and (d) more outcome research studies on this topic (Whiston, Breicheisen & Stephens, 2003). A challenge from Canadian policy makers summed up the situation: “You haven’t made the case for the impact and value of career development services.”

In response to this call for increased attention to demonstrating efficacy, the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) was
formed in 2004. To better understand current and desired evaluation practices in Canada, the CRWG conducted a research project to determine the importance attached to the evaluation of career development services, the extent to which evaluation currently occurs, the types of outcomes identified and/or reported, and the types of outcomes desired but not measured. This article describes the research, what was learned, and the implications for future research and evaluation practices.

**Research Project**

**Method**

The research involved: an on-line survey (in French and English) made available in fall 2004 to Canadian practitioners and agencies that provided career development services, focus groups (French and English) conducted at the National Consultation on Career Development in 2005, and telephone interviews conducted with policy makers and employers in December, 2004 and January, 2005. The survey explored: (a) the importance of assessing the impact of career services, (b) how impact was determined, (c) the results achieved from career services, and (d) how the results were measured. For the purposes of this research, outcomes were defined as the specific result or product of an intervention including changes in client competence, client situation and/or broader changes for the client and/or community. Interventions were defined as any intentional activity implemented in the hopes of fostering client change. The survey included demographic items, rating scales, and open-ended questions. The focus groups provided feedback on the themes identified in the survey results. Telephone interviews ranged in length from 10 to 35 minutes, the goal being to better understand policy maker and employer views of the desired outcomes of career development services, how evaluations of the desired outcomes are conducted, and the evidence and data they would like to have about these services.
Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis followed by chi-square comparisons were used with the survey data. A content analysis (Colaizzi, 1978) was conducted on the responses to open-ended survey questions and the focus group and telephone data, to identify themes.

Results

Survey results. Completed surveys were received from 173 agencies (147 English, 26 French) and 214 practitioners (168 English, 46 French). There were no significant differences between the French and English agency data, so they were merged. Although 97% of agency respondents said it was “somewhat” or “very” important to measure the outcomes/impact of career services, only 84% of agencies actually reported the outcomes/impact of their services. There were significant differences between the responses of French and English practitioners: French practitioners were more likely to rate the measurement of outcomes as “not all that important” while English practitioners were more likely to report the outcomes of their services. However these differences might be attributed more to work setting than to language of practice (see below).

Significant differences also were found between respondents in different work settings. For example, schools (K-12) were less likely to say “Very Important” and post secondary settings were more likely to say “Somewhat Important” when rating the perceived value of measuring impact. English practitioners in schools were less likely to view the value of measuring impact as “Very Important” and not-for-profit agencies were more likely to rate it as “Very Important.” Schools (K-12) were less likely and Not-for Profit agencies were more likely to report the impact of their services. Practitioners in federal government agencies, K-12 Schools, and private practice were less likely to report the impact of their services. The smaller the service provider, the less likely they were to rate the measurement of service impact as “Very Important.” The larger the agency, the more likely they were to actually report on the outcomes of their services. All of the
above significant differences resulted from the chi-square analyses and all were significant at p<.01.

Agencies and practitioners identified the most important outcomes they report as being: change in client employment or educational status (the most common response); skill development, financial independence, connectedness, self-confidence; and the number of clients served. Agencies reported the following ways of measuring outcomes: frequency counts, e.g., number of clients served each month); evaluation and follow-up reports, e.g., client self-reports; and for a few respondents, observations of client change and cost benefit analyses. It is noteworthy that 34% of practitioners did not respond to this item. Practitioners reported that there were outcomes that they achieved but were going unmeasured or unreported. These included: client outcomes such as empowerment, skill development (e.g., personal self-management skills), increased self-esteem, changes in attitudes (e.g., about their future, or about the nature of the workforce), knowledge gains, financial independence; longitudinal follow-up of clients; utilization of services; time required to provide services; and societal benefits. Respondents used anecdotes and observations as evidence they were achieving outcomes, but reported that it was difficult to measure the impact of their services because of the complexity of identifying and measuring outcomes, the perception that evaluation was not important to their funders, and difficulty in obtaining client feedback.

The focus group results confirmed that the survey results represented the “state of practice” of career services impact assessment in Canada. Focus group participants also indicated that there is a need to demonstrate the long-term impact of services and organizational performance, but barriers (e.g., lack of funding and training) exist for conducting effective evaluation. The importance of the unreported outcomes mentioned above was also emphasized.

Generally, the respondents commented that: evaluation is important, guidelines for efficacy assessment need to be developed, the profile of career development services needs to be
raised, and the current evaluation priorities need modification. Evaluation was considered to be
difficult because of the complexity of determining and measuring outcomes and difficulty
following-up with clients. Funders require evaluation, but there is a lack of training in evaluation,
evaluation is not funded, and standardized evaluation protocols and definitions do not exist.

L3Telephone interview results. Telephone interviews were conducted with nine policy makers (of
41 contacted) and seven employers (of 23 contacted) and included two interviews conducted in
French. Policy makers reported using a number of evaluation procedures, including: monitoring
financial and activity reports as well as program use, acquiring feedback from employers or
teachers regarding client outcomes, client portfolios, observation of client outcomes, and surveys
of practitioners, clients or organizations. They also reported the following expectations from the
career development services they fund: client outcomes (e.g., client satisfaction, informed and
wise decisions, and client ability to find career related opportunities), external indicators of client
outcomes (e.g., statistics presenting the number of jobs generated as a result of the services and
the number of successful transitions), data indicating that the services added value in terms of a
return on investment or improving the economy, and longitudinal evidence indicating that the
outcomes of the services were enduring and also allowing comparisons to those who did not
receive the services. Policy makers also wanted information about how career services were
provided. Policy makers made many suggestions for improving evaluation including: acquiring a
better understanding of core concepts involved in evaluation, improving outcome measurement
procedures, being able to demonstrate cause and effect, being able to compare outcomes between
service providers, and measuring the competencies of career practitioners.

Employers wanted the following results from career development services: employees
who were trained, skilled, committed, motivated, satisfied and well-developed; increased
organizational productivity, reduced employee turnover, improved internal employee mobility,
and competency defined positions; and feedback about the services from the service provider and
employees. Employers reported that they currently evaluate career development services by tracking the careers of employees who participated in the services, by reports about the services, and by a variety of other means including the number of employees who use the services.

Employers also had suggestions regarding how evaluations could better provide the information they wanted, including: better identification of outcome indicators, increased employee commitment to the career program; positive company exit evaluations, and quantitative and longitudinal outcome data.

**What Did We Learn from this Research?**

Agencies, practitioners, policy makers, and employers agreed that the assessment of the impact of career development services is important, but all viewed current evaluation procedures as being inadequate. They also made similar suggestions for how to improve current practices. They agreed that many important outcomes are not being measured and reported and that there is a need for evaluation procedures that permit the identification of the differential and longitudinal outcomes of services. They also identified a need for more information and training regarding how to determine the efficacy of career development services, as well as increased support from funders for the evaluation of services.

The survey results indicate that evaluation practices are related to the type of organization providing the services, in that organizations receiving outside funding placed more importance on evaluation than educational organizations with guaranteed funding. This is likely due to different accountability requirements for different organizations and speaks to the importance of using outcome indicators that are relevant to particular stakeholder groups. Overall, very little evaluation is taking place that permits creating a link between the services being provided and the client outcomes being experienced. Many important client outcomes are observed, but not measured or reported and it appears that the main reasons for this relate to the complexity of
measuring outcomes and the lack of tools and resources that could assist service providers in obtaining better efficacy data.

There is a demonstrated need for career development service providers in Canada to have some common evaluation procedures, agreement on the definitions of measurable outcomes, valid and reliable assessment tools, and a means to compare the results of evaluations between service providers. The data from this research clearly point to the need for developing a robust and comprehensive conceptual framework for evaluating career services. Such a framework would need to be responsive to unique service provider needs; allow for diverse career service goals, practices, and desired outcomes; and be useful to service providers and funding sources.

A Conceptual Framework for Evaluation: A Step Forward

As an initial step towards improving evaluation practices, the CWRG is developing a conceptual framework for evaluating career development services. The framework builds on initial work done in Alberta (Hiebert, Lalande, & Magnusson, 2005) and is intended to be a way of organizing information that will permit looking for connections, or areas of influence, between the types of information collected. The CRWG is attempting to develop a framework that is easy to understand (not overly complicated) and yet has the potential to include all the relevant information.

The CRWG evaluation framework consists of 3 main components: inputs, processes, and outcomes. Inputs are the resources available to help clients change (i.e., pursue the outcomes). Processes are the mechanisms involved in achieving the outcomes. Outcomes are the results of the inputs interacting with the processes. The relationship among the three elements is not strictly linear. Processes result in outcomes, but outcomes are also influenced by the inputs available. The nature of the inputs (especially the competencies of the staff) influence the processes that can be
enacted. Thus, even though the pictorial representation may look linear, in reality, the three elements are very interactive.

In order to do a comprehensive evaluation, evidence needs to be gathered on all three evaluation components. The resources that are available (inputs) have an effect on what outcomes are realistic, both the nature of the outcomes and volume of outcomes that can be obtained. Evidence needs to be gathered on the processes that were enacted so that a link can be made between the outcomes obtained and the process that were used. Agencies that routinely gather this sort of evidence, particularly if the evidence gathering process is integrated into service delivery, are more effective in addressing accountability concerns.

When developing programs, the logical place to begin is by identifying the outcomes that are desired, then planning the processes that will be needed to produce those outcomes. After the processes are elaborated, then it is sensible to look at the inputs that will be needed in order to implement the process. An overview of our draft evaluation framework is presented below. Each element in the framework is elaborated following the diagram.
Figure 1. A Draft Framework for Evaluation

**Resources available**
1. Staff
   - Number of staff, level of training, type of training
2. Funding
   - Budget (funding level)
3. Service guidelines
   - Agency mandate
4. Facilities
5. Infrastructure
6. Community resources

**Activities and process that link to outputs or deliverables**
1. **Generic interventions**
   - Working alliance, microskills, etc.
2. **Specific interventions**
   - Career decision making
   - Work-specific skills enhancement
   - Work search
   - Job maintenance
   - Career-related personal development
3. **Quality of service indicators**

**Indicators of client change**
1. **Learning outcomes**
   - Knowledge and skills that can be linked directly to the program or intervention being used
2. **Personal attribute outcomes**
   - Changes in attitudes,
   - Intrapersonal variables, e.g., self-esteem, motivation, etc.
   - Client independence
3. **Impact outcomes**
   - Impact that the learning outcomes or the personal attribute outcomes have on the client’s life, such as employment status, enrolled in training, etc.
   - Social and relational impact
   - Economic impact
Outcomes

Outcomes refer to changes related to clients, including changes in client competence (knowledge and skills), changes in client personal attributes, and changes in client situation and/or broader changes for the client and/or community. As a means of organizing all the possible things that clients might learn from career services, we suggest using the *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (Haché, Redekopp, & Jarvis, 2000) which organizes client learning into 11 categories, grouped into three clusters: personal management, learning and work exploration, and life/work building. Personal attribute outcomes include client changes in attitudes and intrapersonal characteristics such as self-esteem and motivation. These factors are important and most often it is difficult to obtain the desired amount of impact from services if these personal attributes are not addressed. These types of client outcomes need to be identified and addressed in their own right and trustworthy methods need to be developed to evaluate these variables. Impact outcomes are the spin-off effects that derive from the learning outcomes or from changes in client personal attributes. They are the “ultimate, hoped-for” end result of an intervention. They include things such as: employment status (placement rates), participation in training, engaging in job search, and economic impacts.

Processes

Processes can be thought of as having two main components: Interventions, which can be linked directly to the outcomes being sought, and Quality Service Factors, which have an effect on the general operation of the agency but do not directly relate to any specific outcomes. Some interventions are generic, in that they are embedded in most interactions between service providers and clients or third parties. For example, a strong working alliance between service provider and client is important in facilitating client change, and developing a working alliance likely will be part of virtually all interventions. On the other hand, some interventions are more
specific, in that they are linked directly to client goals and outcomes or to interactions with third parties that are intended to foster client change. Based on standard practices and reports from the field, we organized specific interventions into the five main categories: career decision making, work-specific skills enhancement, work search, job maintenance, and career-related personal development. The first four categories represent interventions used to achieve learning outcomes, while the fifth category represents interventions designed to explicitly address changes in personal attributes.

Quality Service Factors are important to address even though they do not relate directly to client outcomes. Sometimes these factors are referred to as outputs, and they include client satisfaction, stakeholder satisfaction, level of service utilization, increased numbers of applicants for services, time required for service provision, etc. If we include them as “outcomes” they get confused with indicators of client change. Therefore, we suggest putting them in “processes” as they are not really indicators of client change, but indicators that appropriate processes have been followed.

**Inputs**

Inputs refer to the resources that an agency can access to provide services. Inputs include the number and training of staff, the agency budget and service mandate, community resources that an agency can draw on, and infrastructure that supports service delivery. These input factors have a large influence on the agency’s ability to offer quality services.

**Evidence-Based Practice and Outcome-Focused Intervention**

Creating greater congruence between the stated importance of evaluation and evaluation practices in the field will require shifts in thinking on the part of all stakeholders involved in delivering career development services. As a starting point, service delivery will need to be seen
as involving two equal components, intervention and outcome. Service delivery is complete when the services are provided and the client changes are documented. Practitioners will need to conceptualize the interventions they deliver in terms of the specific client changes (outcomes) they hope to achieve. Agency managers will need to support practitioners in monitoring the processes involved in implementing the intervention and documenting the outcomes. Policy makers and funders will need to permit (or better yet require) budget allocations for tracking outcomes in addition to implementing interventions. When service delivery is seen as involving both intervention and outcome, then substantial gains will be made towards providing trustworthy evidence on the efficacy of career development services. Figure 2 provides one example of how that documentation might be approached.

Figure 2: Providing Effective Services Requires BOTH Processes and Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career decision making</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work-specific skills enhancement</td>
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<td>Work search</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job maintenance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career-related personal development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Research conducted by the CRWG provides a snapshot of the current evaluation practices utilized by career development agencies and practitioners. The views of policy makers, employers, agencies, and practitioners were remarkably similar regarding the types of outcomes desired and how evaluation practices could be improved. As an initial step towards improving evaluation practices, the CRWG is developing an evaluation framework that can be used to gather evidence, in an organized fashion, that will attest to the efficacy of career development services. Further research is recommended to validate the framework and begin creating a resource base of tools and promising practices that can document the impact of career development services. There is agreement that evaluation is important, and with ongoing dialogue between all stakeholders involved with career development services, we believe it will be possible to make evaluation practices more congruent with the stated importance of evaluation.
References


