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Using Career Information in an Applied Case Management or Counseling Setting

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Career development specialists often work under unenviable conditions. In the hurried world of case management, they handle heavy caseloads increasingly comprised of the hardest-to-serve clients. Charged with providing career and training assistance, case workers and counselors find they must often provide emotional support for their clients as well. Meanwhile, they lack the latest state-of-the-art tools and equipment. In addition, they face organizational incentives that reward routinely processing large numbers of clients rather than helping all clients maximize their potential. Given this environment, even the most well-trained and well-intentioned workers can find their jobs daunting.

This article is intended to assist practicing counselors and case workers by exposing them to a few simple concepts and resources, and describing how to apply them to real world situations. Whether the counseling objective is primarily *direct job placement*, as in the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) Welfare-to-Work program (Work First), or expanding the *education and training* horizons of students, effective use of labor market and career information is crucial to successful case closures. Many automated tools and information resources can assist in the career development process. Some of these materials are available publicly through the cooperative activities of the Texas State Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (SOICC), a multi-agency group charged with expanding our collective understanding of the labor market. We will illustrate how the use of these resources can directly improve the career development process.

"Effective case management and counseling must be pro-active. A passive approach ultimately can hurt everyone involved."

There are two fundamental approaches to using statistical data in case management. The first involves exposing students and clients to *currently available employment opportunities*; the second focuses on sufficiently enhancing their knowledge base to allow students and clients to make *informed choices*. Different agencies take different approaches. Products from the SOICC and others, however, can help accomplish either goal.

Regardless of the overriding philosophy of a particular unit, it is very easy under excessive caseloads to fall into the trap of nominal (or reactive) counseling, i.e., making quick referrals on the basis of a client's spur-of-the-moment desires. All too often, clients do not engage in realistic self-assessment. Moreover, their initial career choices may be ill-considered—perhaps based on prevailing occupational wages (without regard for their own capacity or preparation to do the work entailed) or overly glamorized and untrue media images of particular occupations.

This nominal or reactive approach potentially hurts everyone involved. Nominal case management may do clients a disservice by creating unrealistic expectations that set them up for failure—further alienating them from the real world of work. It can hurt local service providers by filling scarce education and training slots with individuals who lack the capacity or motivation to benefit from the particular level of instruction provided. It can hurt local employers by sending them job-seekers who lack the knowledge, skills and ability to do the work at hand. Finally, nominal case management harms the workforce

development entity itself by: (1) undermining employers' trust in its referrals by sending unqualified applicants; (2) creating a "revolving door" caseload that brings poorly-served clients back time and again for additional services; (3) achieving poor performance results on outcome measures—thus, depriving the entity of bonus and incentive dollars; and (4) undermining public confidence in the system as citizens sense that they are not getting a reasonable return on their investment of tax dollars in employment and training programs.

"It is not enough to know which schools actually offer which programs, but whether the programs prepared students to get jobs or continue their education."

How can case managers avoid these pitfalls? We recommend a pro-active case

management approach that begins with thorough assessments and incorporates the latest technology in the process. The objective of both direct job placement and training interventions in a pro-active case management approach is the successful transition of a client into employment by facilitating the best possible match between the client's abilities and interests and the nature of the work entailed in available job openings. While this is easy to say, many clients have limited vocational skills and educational backgrounds or low levels of workplace motivation, basic skills and self-esteem. These attributes make their transition into the workforce difficult. Career information software and job-search publications will not magically solve all the skills deficits that these clients bring to the table. Clearly, many clients benefit more from other types of intervention such as child care, transportation assistance, substance abuse counseling, and legal and medical assistance, than from career counseling. However, when the process of "finding a job" for the client does begin, there are many resources available to assist both clients and caseworkers.

After completing client registration and intake, a case worker must assess the barriers to the client's employment. Based on an initial interview, the client's eligibility for services is determined and an appropriate referral is made. If the client is deemed "job ready," one of three services might be appropriate, depending on the client's skills and experience: job search, career assessment and exploration, or job training.

First, the client who is ready for work immediately can be instructed in job-search techniques and given leads

to help him/her find a new job. The SOICC's *Texas Job Hunter's Guide* was developed expressly to assist the adult client with their job-search by providing a structured, informative and very interesting approach to getting that next job. As companions to the *Guide*, a series of industry-by-industry and occupational employment projections has been published by the Labor Market Information unit of the TWC for the state and each substate region. These projections are found in hard copy reports and incorporated into automated packages such as the *PJS* (or projections software) and the *SOCRATES* regional planning system. Other SOICC software packages, such as the *RESCUE* system and *Texas CARES*, allow a client to identify specific occupations of interest then develop lists of employers who generally employ persons with those skills. Such targeted lists can serve as the basis for a customized, individual job-search strategy. The client also might be exposed to one of several on-line *Job Banks* which provide listings of actual available job openings. Among these searchable, computerized products are *Job Express*, the *Governor's Job Bank* and the *America's Job Bank* (AJB).

Second, clients who don't know which career to pursue can be given an assessment battery to determine which occupations may be best suited for their talents. Most *One-Stop Centers* and school counseling offices have access to at least one interest or ability assessment instrument. In addition to many high quality assessment batteries available from private vendors, the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (DOL/ETA) has released a series of validated assessment instruments which can be given in either paper-and-pencil or automated formats. Examples include the Work Importance Locator, the Interest Profiler and the Work Values Profiler.

To be effective, career assessment must be coupled with career exploration. One new product designed to facilitate career exploration is the graphical software system called *OSCAR*—available from the SOICC on CD-ROM. This software package enables clients to explore career options, assess transferable skills, and determine the factors most important to them in their preferred work environments. By using *OSCAR*, clients can realistically determine occupational options that match their educa-

"The primary goal of offering an assessment test is to narrow the range of occupations for which a client may be best suited."

tion, interests, knowledge, skills and abilities. Moreover, the America's Job Bank can be launched directly from OSCAR to identify current job openings posted for any of the selected occupations. In addition to traditionally-classified occupations, the SOICC also offers an *Emerging and Significantly Evolving Occupations* publication that captures many new jobs commonly referenced in the national media. Some of these occupations offer viable high-wage alternatives to job-seekers whose existing skills may need only minor upgrading. This same emerging and evolving occupations information has also been incorporated into the *Texas CARES* software program.

Finally, career exploration may lead either to job placement, if clients already possess the requisite skills, or to the realization that they need to acquire additional knowledge and skills to enhance their employability. These clients require training. As counselors guide clients through this discovery process, they put into practice the second, and more powerful, of the two fundamental approaches to counseling: enhancing clients' knowledge base to allow them to make informed choices.

Determining which education or training path might be best for a student or client should depend upon personal responsibility and "informed choice." The process begins with an understanding that the students' or clients' futures are in their own hands. Their economic security and financial independence may well be the result of the educational choices they make today. Ideally, these choices will be "informed choices"—not randomly-made nor based on myth, unsubstantiated "reputations," self-serving marketing hyperbole, misunderstanding, limited exposure to a full range of opportunity or lack of understanding of the possible consequences of choices made. Students must know about the labor market as well as specific careers, schools and programs to make informed educational decisions.

It is the responsibility of counselors and case workers to facilitate well-reasoned educational and workplace choices via a decision-making process that exposes students or clients to: (1) a better idea of their strengths, abilities and interests; (2) a wide range of career opportunities in any given labor market including the characteristics of related occupations; and (3) likely outcomes of specific educational choices. In short, by exposing the individual to available options and working through a

reasoned process to determine which options may be best for that individual, a caseworker can facilitate the transition to work or additional education. Moreover, the counselor can be more confident during that process, knowing that by facilitating "informed choices" their clients will have a greater likelihood of success.

To make informed choices, students and counselors must have accurate information. The SOICC has implemented an in-service professional development program called *Improved Career Decision-Making (ICDM)* to help inform counselors, case workers and other facilitators about national, state, and regional labor market trends, the information resources available to them, and how those trends might shape the career decision-making process. Among the tools available to clients, students and intermediaries alike is the *Texas CARES* career information delivery system software. *Texas CARES* allows users to identify which schools provide which types of educational programs. It also provides detailed descriptions of schools and programs, including costs, campus life, etc. As schools get increasingly automated, many programs (such as *Apply '98*, available through SOICC) allow students to identify financial aid needs and make college application directly to a school via the Internet.

"Informed choice" involves more than knowing which schools actually offer which programs. Prospective students and clients must know if the programs which pique their interest have historically resulted in the quality of preparation that allowed former students to get high-wage jobs related to their training or to continue their education. The SOICC's *Consumer Reports System (CRS)* is an automated software program that provides the performance histories of students after they exited education or training programs. It allows for the comparison of programs within a single school (e.g., Welding and Auto Body Repair at Del Mar College). It also allows comparison of similar programs across different schools (e.g., Nursing at Houston Community College and Nursing at San Jacinto Community College). These performance data simply provide clients or students with a better idea of likely outcomes before they undertake an expensive and time-consuming educational effort. This information is a major part of the "informed choice" concept. It also is critical to case workers and counselors because they can identify programs with better labor market outcomes and optimize the limited pool of education and training dollars.

"A students' or clients' economic security and financial independence may well be the result of the educational or career choices they make today."

It is during this process of deciding which training would best suit clients that second-chance training programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) must work in conjunction with educational providers such as community and technical colleges and private vocational training schools. The reason for dialogue between

“There is little sense in spending scarce resources on occupational training where job prospects are limited.”

the two groups is clear. Education providers want the labor market information that workforce development planners possess so they can provide the needed programs of study. JTPA case managers want to

send their clients to training programs that ultimately will result in employment success if JTPA funding is to be maintained and increased. Working together, education providers and workforce development specialists can benefit their clients and themselves.

Clients are more likely to benefit when they rely on quality information about labor market prospects. But no matter how well-grounded in the best available evidence, a counselor's advice may go unheeded by some. Ultimately, clients are still responsible for and free to choose pathways to the future based on other factors and motives. The bottom line, however, is that in a publicly-funded program, a workforce development entity is not obligated to underwrite the cost of services to anyone unless the individual's goals and objectives mesh with the public interest as defined by that program's authorizing legislation and the local entity's mission statement. In other words, occupational training slots should be selected based on a prioritizing process of regional labor market demand. There is little sense in spending scarce resources on occupational training where job prospects are limited.

Navigating the world of employment is far from simple. However, from the SOICC's *Texas Economy* monograph, which describes recent labor market trends in Texas, to *Targeting Your Labor Market*, a primer to help those new to the job search process better understand the jargon and concepts involved in labor market dynamics, there are many resources to which case workers and counselors can turn. Even the federal government has facilitated smoother labor exchange by creating a dozen different state *consortia* to address issues such as occupational projections, better occupational wage data, an elec-

tronic resume and job posting system (integrating the *Talent Bank* and the *AJB*), and a nationwide listing of education and training opportunities called *America's Training Network* (ATN). Although it is true that the labor market is changing more rapidly than ever, the current array of software, publications, and improved education can help make the case worker/counselor's job just a little easier.

Again, we understand fully that case managers and counselors work under extraordinary caseloads. With Welfare-to-Work reforms being implemented, these caseloads are likely to increase, the average client probably will have more barriers to employment and clients' needs will be more urgent as they come closer to exhausting their eligibility for public assistance. We also understand that it takes some time to review and get comfortable with new tools and materials. Nonetheless, we strongly urge each case manager and counselor to take the time and make the effort to master these tools and really use them on a daily basis. In the long run, mastery of these tools will make the career counseling process easier and more structured while also improving the quality of services to the client.



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The Texas State Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (TSOICC) exists to develop and provide useful information on occupations, educational opportunities, and the labor market.

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