IEP Components Series

Vocational Assessment and Its Role in Career Planning

This issue of **NASET's IEP Component series** was written by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability and discusses career planning and vocational assessment for transition-age youth. Many youth with disabilities have not had the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers in terms of exposure to career preparation options. In the past, the career planning process for youth with disabilities often did not reflect the values of choice and self-determination. Many youth with disabilities were relegated to passive roles in their own career planning process. As a result, many youth have not had the opportunity to pursue career options that they found motivating and satisfying. Today, vocational programs for youth in transition focus on the skills, knowledge, and abilities that youth can contribute to the work place. A large part of this effort lies in accurately identifying a youth's assets and sharing this information with the youth and those who work with him or her. Many young people leave high school uncertain of their interests and abilities and unprepared to choose or pursue a career. Effective career planning and assessment for transition-age youth allows them to consider multiple options, act with self-advocacy, bridge academic and career plans, and equip themselves with critical information (Borgen & Amundsen, 1995). Career planning and assessment focuses on four distinct domains: (1) Academic; (2) Psychological; (3) Medical; and (4) Vocational

This paper focuses on the "vocational domain" and how assessment activities support career related activities.

Vocational Assessment and Its Role in Career Planning

Meeting an Individual's Assessment Needs

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Assessment Activities

Youth benefit from a well-defined assessment process that assists them in making informed choices and achieving desired post-school employment outcomes. This process should include effective practices and the gathering of helpful planning information. To collect all needed data, assessment activities should include observations, interviews, record reviews, and testing/performance activities.

Observation is the process of watching or listening to an individual's behavior and performance and recording relevant information. This process can be structured or unstructured, formal or informal, obtrusive or unobtrusive. Observation has elements of the objective and the subjective, but objectivity should be emphasized. Also, because different observers may come to different conclusions, it may be important to have more than one observer.

Interviews are structured or unstructured conversations intended to gather information from an individual through a verbal question-and-answer format. Like observations, interviews can also be formal or informal. An interviewer can quickly gather key information about an individual, while at the same time build trust and a shared vision for the career planning process.

Record Reviews incorporate prior assessment results and should include records from schools and care providers, as available. A review of records can provide background information about academic achievement and performance, previous career planning and goals, and family involvement and support systems. Care should be taken that the information is up-to-date and from sources that have properly gathered the data. Legally obtained releases of information are usually required, and confidentiality is essential when reviewing any assessment data or other protected records.

Testing and Performance Reviews account for a large share of the most common assessment activities of youth in transition. Testing "consists of administering a particular set of questions to an individual…to obtain a score" (Salvia &Ysseldyke, 2004, p. 6). Typically, scores are intended to be used for quite specific purposes. This type of data collection is generally more formal and structured and frequently requires specially trained persons to administer and/or score the test. It is important to note that accommodations are of particular concern when using criterion-referenced or norm-referenced instruments. The goal should be to change the way that a test is taken without changing the validity of the test results.

Performance reviews are activities that look at a whole spectrum of what has been learned and are more subjective, holistic, and qualitative in nature (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2004, p. 252). Work experiences and related activities often are best evaluated using performance reviews. It is very helpful to have some written, objective standards for individuals to use in measuring behaviors. Observation rating forms are particularly valuable for recording behaviors and outcomes on various tasks and work experiences.

Choosing and Using Published Tests and Assessments

Compiling sufficient data for career planning may require the use of commercially prepared and published tests. These assessments must be chosen with the ultimate goal of helping the individual — this includes considering the effects of an individual's disability on the results of the testing process.

There are a number of factors to consider when choosing tests and assessments. The ideal assessment instrument is: (a) reliable; (b) fair; (c) valid; (d) cost-effective; (e) of appropriate length; (f) well-matched to the qualifications of the test administrator; (g) easy to administer; (h) able to provide easy-to-understand results; and, (i) appropriate for the individual's needs. Test publishers often provide information on these factors on Web sites or in technical manuals.

In addition to considering the factors above, youth service practitioners must choose tests that fulfill the specific needs of the individual. After reviewing available records and conducting informal interviews, planning should determine some short-term, and possibly longer-term, goals. Eligibility assessment can be conducted at this point along with diagnostic or achievement testing to determine where an individual may belong in classes or in training programs. Here, more formal assessments may be used to answer some questions. For our purposes, formal assessments are defined as published instruments with specified administration procedures.

Formal testing is used to assess seven areas related to career planning:

1. Academic Performance or Achievement
2. Cognitive Abilities
3. Behavior, Social, and Emotional Issues
4. Vocational Interests
5. Vocational Aptitudes
6. Certification of Occupational Competencies
7. Physical and Functional Capacities

Individual youth may need assessment in a few or several of these areas. Older youth with established academic credentials or clear vocational goals may not need extensive testing to measure achievement or uncover vocational interests. Plans can be amended and updated depending on testing outcomes, and the youth's input should be considered as much as possible.

The remainder of this Info Brief focuses on areas 4, 5, and 6 which fall under the vocational domain. Area 7 falls under the vocational and medical domains and is considered later in this Info Brief.

Vocational Domain—Interests, Aptitudes, Skills, and Certification Testing

Purposes of Assessment in Work and Career Planning

One of the greatest challenges facing youth service practitioners is helping youth match interests, values, and abilities to suitable jobs, occupations, and career opportunities. Given their limited employment and life experiences, many youth need guidance to identify their vocational interests. Additionally, youth often have a limited understanding of the marketplace and the qualifications needed in their areas of interest. The ability of youth to benefit from work experiences, training, or employment opportunities depends largely on their interest in these activities.

Neubert (1985) and Leconte (1986) have identified seven major uses of informal and formal work and career assessment data:

- Determination of career development: To find out where the student stands in terms of career awareness, orientation, exploration, preparation, placement, or growth/maintenance;

- Measurement: To identify abilities, interests, capabilities, strengths, needs, potentials, and behaviors within the areas of personal/social, functional/academic, community/independent, employment, and employability;
- Prediction: To match an individual's interests and abilities with appropriate training, community employment, or postsecondary training;
- Prescription: To identify strengths and needs, and to recommend types of adaptive techniques and/or remedial strategies that will lead to improved career preparation and development;
- Exploration: To try out different work-related tasks or activities and to determine how interests match abilities for work-based experiences, community jobs, postsecondary, or other adult activities;
- Intervention: To implement the techniques or remedial strategies that will help a student explore career or work options; and,
- Advocacy: To develop a career profile to help students, their families, and others identify concrete ways to assist students in achieving their goals.

Interest Testing

A variety of assessment inventories and tools are available to assist youth in recognizing their predominant interests and preferences. When used properly, these surveys can help youth understand how their interests have direct application to making good academic and career choices. Most career interest inventories are designed to assist youth (and adults) to identify and better understand their interests and connect them to specific job fields or occupational clusters. Interest testing can provide youth with a starting point to further study a range of job possibilities.

Some of the more common interest tests sold commercially include the Campbell Interest and Skill Survey (CISS), Career Exploration Inventory (CEI), COPSystem Interest Inventory (COPS), and the Harrington-O'Shea Career Decision-Making System (CDM-R). The Pictorial Inventory of Careers DV-2000 (PIC) and the Reading Free Vocational Interest Inventory 2 offer "reading-free" interest testing for youth who lack reading or English literacy skills.

A majority of interest inventories are surveys of self-reported interests and skills. When selecting interest inventories for youth, it is important to examine the test manuals to ensure the chosen test is appropriate for the age and grade level of the youth being assessed. It is also helpful to review the survey to determine the skills needed to take it, such as reading ability.

Computer software programs are being developed by both commercial and public service agencies to help match an individual's career interests and KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities) with specific careers or employment fields. These computer software programs can be helpful in a number of ways. First, electronic software programs can help to identify KSA clusters that are relevant to a spectrum of jobs and occupational fields. Secondly, these products enable youth service practitioners to quickly match a youth's career interests and KSAs with a range of possibilities under consideration by a youth and his or her advisors.

Assessing Aptitudes, Work Behaviors, and Skills

Although aptitudes, work behaviors, and skills should be looked at distinctly, it is difficult to separate them when it comes to assessment. Formal and informal assessments can identify an individual's ability to perform specific jobs and to exhibit behaviors and habits that match the work culture. By measuring these areas with paper and pencil, audio-visual, or computer-based assessment, and by analyzing physical activity, insight can be gained regarding an individual's potential.

Aptitude Testing

The ability to identify a youth's KSAs is fundamental to planning and using academic and vocational assessment information. Identifying aptitudes, or potential to learn, provides meaningful information for youth and service providers to inform future career exploration. By design, an aptitude test measures the vocational potential or capacities of an individual to succeed in future career endeavors. Specific aptitude tests, such as the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and Occupational Aptitude Survey and Interest Schedule (OASIS) measure an individual's aptitudes to succeed in specific areas. These may include a youth's capacities for numerical or abstract reasoning, mechanical proficiencies, form perception, verbal or language abilities, or other innate or learned talents under study.

When used with other assessment tools, aptitude testing can contribute to a more complete vocational profile and offer guidance concerning suitable secondary and postsecondary options. This is especially true in identifying career development pathways where specific academic or job strengths are known to be crucial and relevant. The use of aptitude assessment isolated from other vocational assessment information tends to screen out youth with significant disabilities. However, aptitude tests may be helpful when used as tools to identify customized job training, supports, or accommodations that may be needed by an individual to succeed in an occupation of high interest.

Keep in mind that aptitude means *potential* to learn. Aptitudes and skills should always be correlated with interests (and to a lesser degree, temperaments). For example, a youth may be interested in engineering but have poor academic skills and aptitudes — or another may perform poorly academically but have high interest and motivation for welding. Young people with high motivation may eventually succeed despite low reading or math achievement or aptitude scores.

Learning style preferences should also be determined in order to assist youth in understanding and articulating how they best receive or process information. A youth who is an auditory learner may not perform as well when given written instructions or assessments, and as a result his or her scores may not accurately represent his or her performance.

Situational Work Assessments

Occupational skills and work behaviors can be assessed in situational work assessments and include capacities and competencies to perform essential job duties of specific competitive employment positions. For example, the measurement of a youth's keyboarding proficiency may be predictive of his abilities to succeed in a job where the duties require minimum standards of speed for data entry or word processing. Allowing youth to try essential job functions of different jobs will help them decide if they really enjoy the work and if they have the stamina to meet work requirements.

In a similar way, situational skills assessment can be used to assess the KSAs of youth for a wide range of competitive jobs. This is accomplished by determining the core job competencies and duties required of a skilled worker and then comparing the actual performance of a youth who is being assessed. For example, a competitively employed housekeeper may be required to clean ten hotel rooms over an eight-hour work period. In this instance, the skills and productivity of a youth can be measured by comparing his capacity to clean a similar number of rooms while meeting the hotel's standards for cleanliness and job performance quality. Similarly, an assessment can be designed to measure other skills such as those needed to write a computer program used in business or manufacturing.

The outcomes of occupational skills assessment are not entirely predictive of future success in a competitive job situation but they often can lead to job skills training, apprenticeships, or internships that help youth to increase their competency and productivity. They can also lead to the development of creative, individualized job placement plans such as customized employment or "job carving" — a restructuring of job duties or tasks so that a youth with documented KSAs can successfully perform job functions of high interest. Typically, job carving is provided for people who cannot, for a variety of reasons, perform the entire job or the whole range of skills required.

In special education programs and community rehabilitation organizations, situational work assessments are also often used to study the "soft skills" needed in employment. They include an assessment of basic work behaviors and skills through practical hands-on work experiences. Situational work assessments are often supervised by trained vocational evaluators, educators, or community rehabilitation professionals.

Situational work assessments are ideally provided in partnership with community businesses but may also be offered in settings controlled by education or youth service providers. Business settings work well because they offer a more accurate view of a youth's performance within the context of normal business rules and practices. Situational work assessments can lead to the development of baseline data and assist youth service practitioners in engaging customized job training or other work supports a youth may need to obtain a satisfactory job placement outcome.

Youth with identified behavioral disorders can benefit greatly from situational work assessments. In a work setting with appropriate supports and careful supervision, youth with behavior problems can often experience success. If work assessments are provided in local businesses, it is very important to educate employers about working with youth with disabilities. This may mean receiving permission from a youth and her guardians to share information with a business before it agrees to host a situational work assessment.

Wages can sometimes be an issue in work-based assessments. On-the-Job Training (OJT) or wage subsidy programs can be used on a time-limited basis to help compensate a participating business for their contributions of time and support on behalf of a youth receiving assessment services. DOL permits the use of time-limited waivers when a youth with a disability is undergoing a vocational evaluation or work assessment in partnership with a community business.

Work Sampling

Work samples are standardized testing instruments that are sometimes used to help assess the job potential of youth. Standardized work samples offer the qualities of testing validity and reliability because they are statistically normed to specific populations. A number of commercially available work samples, such as the VALPAR Work Samples, are sometimes used to assess a youth's vocational potential or abilities to perform in jobs within specific career fields. Following each testing procedure, the outcome performance of a youth is compared to the performance scores of target populations. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the vocational potential of a youth in comparison to his peers or other groups. Frequently for youth, commercially available work samples are used for career exploration, and norms are not used.

In addition to commercially developed products on the market, some secondary education, youth development, and community rehabilitation programs have chosen to design and use their own work samples. Custom-designed work samples enable trained vocational evaluators to measure the skills and performance of a youth with regard to specific tasks or occupations. The advantage of using custom-designed work samples is the ability to use locally developed norms to compare the job performance of the youth to peers or industry standards (i.e., other students, youth, co-workers, master craftsmen, etc.). The disadvantage is the limited amount of validity and reliability data available. But most locally developed work samples have high face validity: they look like work, sound like work, and feel like work. They provide hands-on work exploration while also identifying interests, skills, aptitudes, work behaviors, and temperaments. Most youth enjoy performing work samples and get a real taste of the tools, materials, and equipment a job or training program might entail.

In recent years, there has been much criticism concerning the use of standardized work samples because of their potential for misuse in screening people with disabilities away from postsecondary and employment options. A growing number of school settings, youth development programs, and community rehabilitation programs are adopting assessment methods that are more inclusive in exploring career opportunities for youth. Although work samples may offer useful information in controlled situations, test scores should be used with great care. It is never appropriate to use only standardized testing procedures of any kind to make sweeping, predictive assumptions about a youth's ability to work in the competitive labor market.

A Word about Work Environments

Ecological or environmental assessments examine a variety of factors that may contribute significantly to the success of an individual at work. These may include, but are not limited to, availability of close supervision; style of supervision (i.e., casual vs. autocratic); physical building structures and layout of the learning or working environment; flow of product or service processes; effects of formal and informal rules; social interaction demands of others (i.e., co-workers, classmates); sensory stimuli such as noise, motion, temperature, air quality, etc.; work schedules and time requirements; opportunities for independence and decision-making; performance expectations of authorities; and, opportunities for self-correction. Temperaments (preference of working with data, people, or things; preference for indoor vs. outdoor work; working with people or alone) play a large role in ecological assessments.

Some environmental conditions are more likely than others to promote unwanted social behaviors. For example, classroom or business settings that produce high levels of sensory stimulation may tend to increase discomfort and anxiety in some youth. These types of environments may supply the trigger for socially unacceptable behaviors or work habits. Certain types of education and business environments may be more tolerant of nonstandard behaviors exhibited by a youth. For example, the loading dock of a trucking company may be more tolerant of a youth's use of profanity than the local community library. Or a youth with a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) may function more effectively in a warehouse that requires rapid movement, changes in job tasks, and physical stamina than in a sedentary job that requires continuous concentration.

Some companies or organizations are better than others in welcoming and mentoring new employees. However, all youth who are placed in jobs or work experiences should be prepared for the particular workplace culture they will encounter. Appropriate job matches and effective career preparation or training can help a new employee feel more comfortable and adapt to the work environment.

Certification of Occupation Specific Skills and Credentialing

Employers often require certification of skills and knowledge based on industry standards for the hiring or promotion of employees. Therefore, a youth's vocational development goals may dictate the need for training leading to standardized assessments certifying skill levels or ensuring that minimum standards of proficiency have been achieved.

Skills certification testing is used for performance assessment and credentialing by postsecondary vocational technical training schools, colleges, on-the-job training programs, and other job preparation programs. Skills certification testing is also an industry and business requirement for recruiting qualified employment candidates. Procedures used for credentialing can include the administration of written or computerized examinations as well as functional skills assessments. Some require performance-based activities.

Skills standards established by industries help secondary and postsecondary education and job training programs produce better qualified candidates to meet the skilled labor needs of businesses and industries. Credentialing exams help job candidates communicate their skills to prospective employers; they also help learners identify training they will need to advance in their chosen career fields. Ultimately, the certification process helps employers build a workforce capable of meeting the highest performance standards in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Vocational/Medical Domains—Physical and Functional Capacities Testing

Assessing Work Capacities

In some instances, it may be helpful to assess the muscular strength, endurance, motor coordination skills, and other physical capacities of youth. This is particularly true for youth who are physically or medically fragile due to chronic diseases, progressive illnesses, and other health conditions that limit physical strength or motor capacities. For example, a youth's ability to manage a full-time work schedule or perform tasks that demand physical exertion, strength, or motor skills coordination is very important information for matching a student to suitable employment or career fields. This information is also critical to identifying needs for accommodations so a youth who is physically or medically fragile can handle the essential functions of a job or participate successfully in a postsecondary education program. It is important to remember that youth may eventually develop physical capacities as they grow and mature physically.

Work capacities testing can also give some indication if a particular type of work is appropriate for an individual based on age or maturity level. For example, an immature youth may not be ready to function in a job with high social demands and responsibilities such as a nursing assistant or child care aide. Or a youth who is lacking in emotional maturity may not be ready to manage the hectic pace of a typical lunch hour at a local fast-food restaurant chain.

The following assessment techniques are used to assist in identifying a youth's physical capacities:

Work Tolerance and Functional Capacities Assessment – Work tolerance testing (also known as work hardening assessment) is a structured process for examining and measuring the physical endurance, strength, motor coordination skills, and emotional capacities of a worker when performing essential job tasks. These types of assessments are commonly used for people who have serious medical problems or who have had significant injuries, often job-related. The goal of work tolerance testing is to measure whether a worker can manage a regular job routine or full-time work schedule and perform essential job tasks without excessive fatigue or pain. Work tolerance testing also measures range of motion, lifting and carrying, manual dexterity, and motor coordination skills that are necessary to do a job successfully.

Work tolerance and functional capacities assessments can be conducted in formal as well as informal testing formats. A number of commercially developed testing strategies are available to assess physical capacities, and work tolerance assessments also can be conducted in real job settings in ways similar to situational work assessments. In these instances, the assessment of physical and emotional work capacities is achieved by observing and recording the job performance of youth in competitive business environments. Standardized work samples are sometimes used to measure a worker's ability to perform specific physical movements (e.g. stooping, reaching) or coordination of motor skills (e.g., hand-eye coordination).

Work tolerance testing is normally conducted by trained vocational evaluators who are skilled in these assessment methods and procedures. Job coaches, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and rehabilitation engineers are often knowledgeable about assistive technologies or accommodations that can enhance the functionality of people with physical or emotional limitations. Care must be taken to follow a physician's guidelines in order to prevent harm or additional physical or medical injury to the youth.

Motor Skills and Manual Dexterity Testing – Some standardized assessment tests, such as the Crawford Small Parts Dexterity Test or the Purdue Pegboard Test, can measure a youth's finger dexterity, manual dexterity, or hand-eye coordination. These dexterity tests can help to measure a youth's capacities to move hands, fingers, arms (gross movement), or to control the movement and manipulation of small objects. This information may be helpful to youth with complex physical disabilities who are considering careers or job opportunities in fields that require good manual dexterity. Also, these tests can help to determine needs for assistive technology or accommodations that may enable a youth to perform the essential functions or tasks of a desired job.

Assessing Assistive Technology Needs and Making Accommodations – Sometimes youth can improve their skills or behaviors through education or training so they can manage the essential functions of a desired job. And sometimes tasks can be restructured or workplaces can be modified so a youth can perform the essential functions of a desired job. Assistive technologies can also be introduced to bridge gaps in a youth's functional skills or capacities, thereby enabling her to perform the essential functions of a desired job.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1988 first acknowledged the rights of youth with significant disabilities to obtain assistive technology assessments in order to determine their ability to benefit from vocational rehabilitation services. According to the Act, "assistive technology means any item, piece of equipment, or product system, acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities." The Assistive Technology Act of 2004 further defined the rights of people with disabilities to access needed technologies by: "(1) identifying Federal policies that facilitate payment for assistive technology devices and assistive technology services, (2) identifying Federal policies that impede such payment, and (3) eliminating inappropriate barriers to such payment."

Assistive Technology Assessments – The field of rehabilitation engineering and assistive technology is rapidly evolving and is contributing amazing quality of life enhancements for people with disabilities. The expertise of rehabilitation engineers and technologists, occupational therapists, vocational evaluators, and supported employment professionals may be helpful in the technology assessment needs of youth with significant disabilities. The goal is to examine how commercially made products or custom-designed technologies can be used to improve the functionality and capabilities of youth with complex physical, intellectual, or emotional disabilities.

Assistive technology assessments can offer valuable information about the functional capacities of youth and whether technology can be effectively used to ameliorate the effects of a disability. For example, assistive technology applications can include high-tech equipment such as hearing devices, robotic arms, or talking computers. However, a majority of assistive technologies involve low-tech applications such as the use of Braille or lowering the height of a work table for someone in a wheelchair. Frequently, low-tech devices can solve accommodation issues.

In summary, assistive technology assessments can examine and improve a youth's opportunities for integration so he or she can: (a) participate and succeed in mainstream educational programs; or (b) perform the essential functions of desired jobs in the competitive labor market. The use of assistive technology in the classroom and workplace requires creative problem-solving skills and ingenuity and access to an expert.

Assessing Postsecondary Training and Workplace Accommodations – Youth with disabilities often need adaptations in classrooms or worksites to accommodate or minimize the affects of their disability. Vocational assessments can lead to practical ideas for job or training accommodations at businesses or in postsecondary training programs. Such accommodations might include modifications to a job, restructuring of tasks, use of job coaches to assist with training, use of interpreters, or alternative methods of communication. Assessing the need for accommodations often goes hand-in-hand with assessing assistive technology needs.

Medical and Physical Capacities Testing – The use of medical diagnostic testing information may, in a few cases, assist in effective career planning for youth with serious health and physical disabilities. The use and integration of medical and physical capacities information may help in determining the suitability of career development goals and any specific needs a youth may have for accommodations in education, training, or employment settings. For example, the presence of chronic diseases or progressive illnesses such as multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, diabetes, cancer, cystic fibrosis, or heart disease can have serious career development implications.

The use of diagnostic testing and the expert guidance of a physician or other medical specialist (e.g., a heart surgeon, oncologist, or physical therapist) may offer new information about functional or capacities limitations that may be associated with specific conditions. Medical professionals can also be instrumental in helping youth with chronic medical conditions monitor their situations and perform their own health care tasks.

Physical, Speech, and Occupational Screening – Some youth with disabilities may need assistance in developing the physical, speech, or daily living skills they need to obtain desired academic or vocational goals. Many local education agencies and therapeutic service programs offer screening services to assist youth in identifying and measuring specific physical, speech, and functional living skills capacities. These diagnostic screening services are provided by therapists and clinicians who are trained in their respective disciplines (e.g., speech, audiology, or occupational therapies). Therapeutic screening support is often helpful to youth with some disability conditions in planning for needed supports as they pursue their postsecondary education, training, employment, and independent living goals.

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