
The Evaluation of Career and Employment Counselling: A New Direction

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Abstract

The partners that make up the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB), which are business, labour, education/training and the employment equity groups, have traditionally viewed career and employment counselling as important. However, information on the availability of career and employment counselling services across Canada has been lacking. There is also little evaluative information to demonstrate the contribution of counselling in helping people make the transition from school to work or unemployment to employment. A survey of career and employment counselling conducted under the sponsorship of the CLFDB showed that little counselling evaluation is being done in the schools, colleges, universities, within community agencies or the Canada Employment Centres. The absence of evaluative information places the service at risk of being discontinued. Those in leadership positions have to be convinced of the need for more and better evaluation of counselling. A new model or models for the evaluation of career and employment counselling is needed, as are new measurement instruments.

Résumé

Bien que les divers partenaires qui composent la Commission de mise en valeur de la main-d'oeuvre (CCMMO), soit milieu des affaires, syndicats, organismes d'enseignement et de formation et groupes d'action sociale, considèrent depuis toujours le counseling de carrière et d'emploi comme très important, il n'en demeure pas moins que les données sur les services de counseling en la matière sont très peu nombreuses et ce, partout au pays. Rares sont également les données d'évaluation sur l'aide qu'apporte le counseling dans le cadre de la transition de l'école au monde du travail, ou encore de la situation de chômeur (euse) à celle de travailleur (euse) actif(ve). Les réponses à un sondage entrepris sous le parrainage de la CCMMO sur le counseling de carrière et d'emploi révèlent que l'évaluation du counseling est presque inexistante que ce soit dans les écoles, les collèges ou les universités, ou encore dans les organismes communautaires ou les Centres d'emploi du Canada. Cette absence de données d'évaluation risquant d'entraîner la disparition du counseling, il est donc devenu crucial aujourd'hui de convaincre les dirigeants de tous les niveaux de la nécessité de procéder à une évaluation à la fois meilleure et plus fréquente du counseling. Il est en outre indispensable de disposer d'un ou de plusieurs modèles d'évaluation du counseling de carrière et d'emploi, ainsi que de nouveaux instruments de mesure.

The view that counselling is important in the training and adjustment of workers, and in the successful transition of Canadians from school to work and from unemployment to employment, was a theme expressed by the Labour Market Task Forces convened in 1989-90 by the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre (Report of the CLMPC Task Forces on the Labour Force Development Strategy, 1990). That theme was more recently repeated by the committees and task forces of the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB). All of the labour market partners have long recognized that an important part of the development of competent citizens and workers is their ability to

make informed occupational, vocational or career decisions, and to adequately prepare for employment. But a clear picture of the availability of career and employment counselling services across the country has been lacking.

In response to the need for more information on the quality and quantity of career and employment counselling services delivered through the federal and provincial governments and community agencies, the CLFDB commissioned a major national study. From January to April 1993, the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation (CGCF), under contract with the CLFDB, surveyed a sample of counsellors, their managers, supervisors, and department heads, and those who fund counselling services. The final study report (Conger, Hiebert & Hong-Farrell, 1993) highlighted nine areas where further work is needed. Among them is the evaluation of counselling.

The Evaluation Need

From the Conger, Hiebert and Hong-Farrell (1993) study it is observed that there is little systematic evaluation of counselling in all jurisdictions. The exception is the federal department of Human Resources Development (HRD) where a new accountability structure for counselling, complete with performance measures, has recently been introduced. Many counsellors try to determine if their clients' needs are being met by either asking clients if they are receiving the help they need, or by inferring from their reactions that they are satisfied. But the majority of counsellors surveyed in the study did not have a systematic or structured method of ascertaining if their interventions with a client were really helping the client to prepare for, or enter, a career or job. For school counsellors, evaluation seems even less important than it does for community or Canada Employment Centre (CEC) counsellors. Of course, there may be a sense that the final outcome for most students is not so immediate as it is for the clientele of community agencies and CECs. Nonetheless, it is the case that in schools very little evaluation of either intermediate or final outcomes is conducted.

There seems to be interest in the evaluation of counselling among employment counselling program administrators and consultants. Many consultants are involved in the development of methods to assess the effectiveness of counselling. However, school guidance consultants have little involvement in the evaluation of career counselling. Few develop assessment instruments and more than half do not expect evaluation to be done. Among community agency managers, there is not much acknowledgement that evaluation activities need to be supported. Not surprisingly then, community agency employment counselling program administrators and consultants that try to have their offices do follow-up on clients report limited success in actually getting the follow-ups done.

Overall, one can conclude that leadership in the area of counselling evaluation is weak in education, and among community agencies the evaluation efforts of administrators and consultants are generally not supported at the points of delivery.

Because evaluation is mandatory for all major programs in federal government departments, employment counselling provided in Canada Employment Centres was evaluated once in the past 20 years. However, systematic evaluation of the counselling service has not been an integral part of program delivery. While the survey revealed that many Canada Employment Centre counsellors informally assess their counselling during or immediately after the counselling interview, few counsellors involved their clients in any evaluation, and the use of a standardized format for evaluation is lacking.

Logically, counsellors should have information on the short and long term impacts of their interventions with various clients if they are to adjust their approach to best help their clients resolve their labour adjustment problems and achieve their career goals. Decision-makers also need to be shown that counselling interventions are worth investing in. The results of the CLFDB counselling study suggest that the majority of managers of counselling and department heads in education are not convinced of the value of the service. Without evaluative information, career and employment counselling services could be "downsized" out of existence.

Why There is So Little Counselling Evaluation

While the Conger, Hiebert and Hong-Farrell (1993) study was quite broad and comprehensive, it was not possible in a single questionnaire to obtain detailed responses in all areas of interest. Therefore, the survey questions focused on the extent to which counselling is evaluated, and on the importance placed on evaluation. There were no questions which probed for the reasons why counselling may not be evaluated more extensively. Nonetheless, some reasons can be suggested from the responses of counsellors, managers and consultants to other questions.

There is little question that evaluating career and employment counselling is complex. For ethical reasons, it is not possible to use an experimental approach to the evaluation of an ongoing service. Counselling, which is believed to be necessary in making appropriate career choices and in resolving career/labour adjustment problems, just can not be offered to some clients and not to others for the sole purpose of evaluation. Matching clients after the fact from file data to construct a control (non-counselling) group has also proven to be problematic.

For evaluators, the lack of clarity and agreement on the outcomes of counselling is a real source of frustration. Typically, program evaluators have focused on economic outcomes such as weeks of unemployment or

average wage rates after several employment counselling interviews. But counselling is a process, unlike many job training programs. It aims to help a client become more self-sufficient, to change attitudes and to build problem-solving skills. There may be an effect on wage rates and durations of unemployment from counselling, but the effects are mediated by other "learning outcomes" such as self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making and transition skills. It is not easy for counsellors, researchers, and evaluators of counselling to define these learning outcomes, and until that is done evaluation efforts will continue to be frustrated.

Furthermore, evaluation has not been emphasized in the education and training of counsellors. Many counsellors see structured and generalizable evaluations of their counselling interventions as an unnecessary burden; something that detracts from the real task of working with clients. Indeed, even the use of the simplest assessment or follow-up form requires a proportion of the counsellor's valuable time. For a number of counsellors, verifying with the client the usefulness of the counselling during or immediately after a session is all that is required for the counsellor's purposes.

Different views about the kinds of evaluation instruments that are needed have probably impeded a broader application of evaluation in counselling. In fact, a variety of evaluation and assessment systems are in place, and many different instruments are being used. This information needs to be shared within the profession and with managers, administrators and funders of counselling. Still, there is no evidence that comprehensive evaluation systems which are transportable across settings have been developed.

The Ingredients of an Evaluation Model

For the evaluation of counselling to be embraced more broadly, it must serve counsellors, counselling managers and program administrators, counselling consultants, those who fund counselling, department heads and others who use program effectiveness information to make decisions about counselling service availability and resource allocation. Clients also need to be able to access evaluative information to assist them in making choices about the kinds of help they might seek. Thus, any evaluation model for counselling must recognize the legitimate needs of the variety of users of the information.

One conceptualization that is helpful in framing the kinds of information needed by various users of counselling evaluation is the "input-process-output" paradigm.

Input information would include data on client characteristics, program design features, specific priorities, budget levels and allocations, and policy and planning statements. This type of information is gathered at

the outset of counselling service delivery. It is related to what the counselling interventions are *designed* to achieve, who the targeted clientele are, and what resources are to be expended to achieve the predetermined objectives.

Process information refers to data on counselling delivery methods and agents, service expenditures, organizational response to policies and priorities. Gathering this type of information occurs during and immediately after the delivery of counselling to clientele. It is information useful to describe what happened, when, to whom and at what cost.

Output information can be considered of three types: volumes and ratios gauged against targets or planned levels; short term impact data; and long term impact information. It is this category of information that is important in deciding what worked and what did not work, for whom and why or why not.

A Development Process for Counselling Evaluation

To develop evaluation models for counselling that will provide a framework for the gathering of input, process and output information needed by those involved in counselling delivery, planning, management, and resource allocation, action must be taken on two fronts.

1. Advocacy

It is apparent that many counsellors in all jurisdictions see little value in devoting their time to evaluation, other than performing their own ongoing and informal assessment of client satisfaction. A large percentage of managers, administrators and department heads lack conviction that counselling is important, and have done little to have its effectiveness measured. Before counselling evaluation will get the kind of support it needs to have new models and instruments developed and introduced, decision-makers within and outside the profession need to be shown the important role counselling plays in individual career and employment development, and the value of having comprehensive information on the process and outcomes of counselling interventions.

A means being proposed to garner the support and involvement of counselling community and others who make decisions affecting counselling services, is the establishment of a series of regional "leadership in counselling forums." Invitations to the forums would include national and provincial professional associations, provincial government departments, Human Resources Development, and other employers of counsellors, CLFDB constituent groups and representation from secondary, post-secondary and community counselling groups. The aim of the forums would be to reach consensus on the need for standards

(including evaluation standards and approaches) and on an outline of standards.

2. Research and Development

The symposium on "Issues and Solutions for Evaluating Career Development" held at Mount Saint Vincent University on March 3-5, 1993 was an important step in focusing on existing and potential evaluation approaches and instruments. However, there will need to be strong follow-up linked to the standards outlined through the "leadership in counselling forums." In fact, the ongoing development and dissemination of new counselling approaches, methods, materials, tools, and evaluation models and instruments will require the establishment of a coordinating body. One suggestion is that a "Professional Support Centre for Career and Employment Counselling" be established which could have new research undertaken as well as serving as a resource centre for the sharing of ongoing developments. Serving as an initiator for research and development as well as a clearing house for information sharing, the centre would help establish pilot and demonstration projects for alternative counselling service delivery approaches, for the application of new counselling methods and techniques, and for the development and implementation of alternative evaluation approaches and instruments. The centre could eventually take on a broader role in providing strong advocacy for quality counselling and improved accessibility to the service.

Conclusion

Evidence from the recent Conger, Hiebert and Hong-Farrell (1993) study suggests that career and employment counselling is not being systematically evaluated. In a time of fiscal restraint, public and private bodies are looking for ways to reduce operating costs. In the absence of some definitive information on the contribution that career and employment counselling can make and is making, there is a real danger that counselling, which is now not well integrated with other career and employment programming, will be pushed further to the side, with even fewer resources given to it.

It will not be enough to have academic researchers investigate new approaches and develop new instruments for the evaluation of counselling. There needs to be a shift in the attitudes of counsellors, their managers, counselling program consultants and administrators toward a recognition of the importance of counselling in general, and of the necessity of having effective, ongoing evaluation of the service. Only then will any new developments find their way into practice.

References

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