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## Demonstrating Value: A Draft Framework for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Career Development Interventions

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### ABSTRACT

The findings from recent Canadian research indicate that while agency managers and front-line workers agree that evaluation is important, they seldom evaluate their work with clients. With the current emphasis on evidence-based practice and outcome-focused intervention, it is important to be able to demonstrate the value of career services in a manner that service providers find meaningful and funders find useful. In this article a framework for evaluation is presented that permits linking the services provided with the client outcomes that are being achieved.

### RÉSUMÉ

Les résultats de recherches canadiennes récentes indiquent que les directeurs d'organismes et les travailleurs de première ligne évaluent rarement leur travail auprès des clients même s'ils conviennent de l'importance d'une évaluation. Vu l'accent mis actuellement sur la pratique et l'intervention axées sur les résultats, il est important de pouvoir démontrer la valeur des services de perfectionnement professionnel d'une façon que les fournisseurs de services trouvent significative et que les bailleurs de fonds trouvent utile. Cet article présente un cadre d'évaluation qui permet de relier les services fournis aux résultats réalisés auprès des clients.

Recent Canadian research (Lalande, Hiebert, Magnusson, Bezanson, & Borgen, 2006; Lalande & Magnusson, 2007) indicates that front-line workers and agency managers believe that it is important to evaluate career guidance services; however, the majority reported that they seldom actually evaluate their work with clients. Furthermore, the majority of respondents indicated that they thought the work they did was beneficial and effective, but the evidence they collected would make it difficult to provide a convincing link between the interventions they used and the outcomes they observed.

In international symposiums held in 1999, 2001, and 2003 (Bezanson & O'Reilly, 2002; Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000), as well as in a national symposium held in 2004, a common theme expressed by policy makers was that they were amenable to consider providing funds for career development services, but, in the absence of evidence attesting to the efficacy of such services, it was difficult for them to justify spending the money. There was a frequently occurring theme of *show me the evidence* that for the most part came from policy makers, and was met with resistance from service providers. However, the challenge is legitimate: Without efficacy evidence, it is difficult for funders to support the delivery of career development services.

After the 2005 international symposium, a group of researchers decided to explore the manner in which the challenge of *show me the evidence* could be addressed. An exploratory meeting was held, funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and facilitated by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF). From that initial meeting a group of researchers formed the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) to address the need to demonstrate the efficacy of career development services. The evaluation framework presented in this article is the result of collaboration between members of the CRWG.

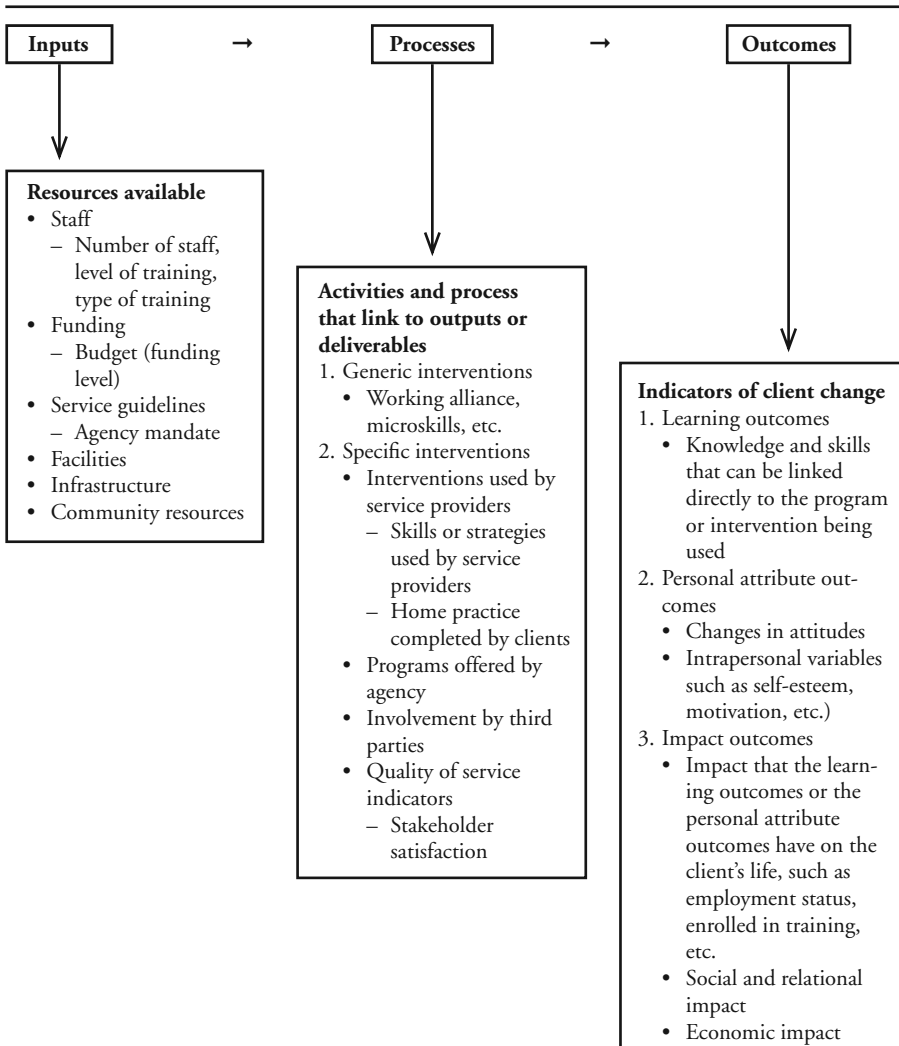
#### A DRAFT EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

There are many good evaluation models in the literature (cf. Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). However, no one evaluation model is "best" in all regards: Each model has strong points and each has aspects that are not as suitable for the career development field. In early meetings, members of the CRWG examined numerous evaluation models and concluded that since no single model was superior in all regards, it was best to pick one model and develop it as fully as possible. In developing an evaluation framework, members of the CRWG were cognizant of three guiding principles: (a) A framework is simply a way of organizing relevant information, there likely is no best framework, and any number of frameworks would likely be sufficient for most tasks; (b) The underlying purpose of any framework is to organize relevant information in a way that permits people to look for causal connections, or areas of influence, between the types of information collected; and (c) It is useful to select a framework that is easy to understand (not overly complicated) and yet robust enough to accommodate most of the data that are relevant to career development services.

As a starting point, members of the CRWG chose a very basic framework consisting of three elements: inputs, processes, and outcomes. The framework is focused on understanding the changes (outcomes) experienced by people receiving career services. Inputs refer to the resources that are available to help clients change (i.e., pursue the outcomes). Processes are the mechanisms that are involved in achieving the outcomes. Outcomes are the changes in service recipients (clients), that is, the results of the inputs enacting the processes. These three components are elaborated below and depicted pictorially in Figure 1.

Figure 1

*Evaluation framework: A tool for organizing relevant evaluation information*



## Outcomes

In the model depicted in Figure 1, outcomes refer to the specific results of an intervention, including changes in client competence (knowledge and skills), changes in client personal attributes, changes in client situation, and/or broader changes for the client and/or community. These broader outcomes usually can be thought of as the impact of the changes in client competence or changes in client personal attributes. The choice to tie outcome to client change was deliberate. Research conducted in Alberta (Hiebert, Lalande, & Magnusson, 2005) and nationally (Lalande et al., 2006; Lalande & Magnusson, 2007) indicated that service providers had difficulty identifying outcomes that could be linked to programs or services offered. For example, research participants suggested that an intervention such as *networking* could result in outcomes such as *build and maintain a positive personal image*, *change and grow throughout one's life*, and *maintain balanced life/work roles*. Clearly, the link between teaching clients to network and *building a positive self-image* is tenuous at best. Furthermore, few agencies, we suspect, would feel comfortable being held accountable for producing outcomes such as *building a positive self-image* as a result of a workshop on networking. Thus, we have restricted our conceptualization of outcome to client change in knowledge or skills, personal attributes, and life impact.

*Framework for organizing client learning outcomes.* As a means of organizing the things that clients might learn as a result of accessing career services, the CRWG suggests using the framework from *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (Haché, Redekopp, & Jarvis, 2000). The *Blueprint* contains 11 categories of knowledge and/or skills grouped into three clusters (see Figure 2). The *Blueprint* has become widely accepted as a way of describing client learning outcomes and many of the resources available to career practitioners are now indexed to the *Blueprint*, making it easier to choose resources that are appropriate for the learning outcomes being sought.

## Figure 2

### *The Blueprint for Life/Work Designs: A framework for organizing client learning outcomes*

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1. Personal management outcomes
    - Build and maintain a positive personal image
    - Interact positively and effectively with others
    - Change and grow throughout one's life
  2. Learning and work exploration outcomes
    - Participate in lifelong learning supportive of life/work goals
    - Locate and effectively use life/work information
    - Understand the relationship between work and society/economy
  3. Life/work building outcomes
    - Secure, create, and maintain work
    - Make life/work-enhancing decisions
    - Maintain balanced life and work roles
    - Understand the changing nature of life/work roles
    - Understand, engage in, and manage one's own life/work process

*Framework for organizing client personal attribute outcomes.* In the research cited above (Hiebert et al., 2005; Lalande et al., 2006; Lalande & Magnusson, 2007), respondents identified some changes in client personal attributes that they thought were important, but which they did not (or were not allowed to) measure or report. Rather than get into a debate about whether or not these personal attributes are in fact learned, we have identified them as a separate category of outcomes, acknowledging that some people may view these as learning outcomes and others may not. We have organized these personal attributes into three broad categories: (a) attitudes (e.g., belief that change is possible, internal locus of control); (b) intrapersonal factors (e.g., confidence, motivation, self-esteem); and (c) client independence (e.g., client self-reliance, client initiative, independent client use of tools provided in career services).

In the literature these personal attributes are sometimes referred to *precursors* (Hiebert, 1994; Killeen, White, & Watts, 1993; Maguire & Killeen, 2003), for they often mediate between skill and knowledge attainment and the life-impact outcomes. These personal attributes speak to a client's willingness (ability) to put learning into action. In one of the first meetings of the CRWG, agreement was reached that these are in fact outcomes, and the suggestion was made that we cluster them together in a category called "personal attributes." Regardless of the label used to describe these sorts of outcomes, there is widespread agreement that they are important and that it most often is difficult to obtain the desired amount of impact if these personal attributes are not addressed. Therefore, 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.

*Framework for organizing client impact outcomes.* Impact outcomes are the spin-off effects that derive from the learning outcomes, and perhaps from the personal attribute outcomes. 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, client ability to fit in at the workplace (resulting in increased job stability), societal impacts (such as reduced crime or reduced substance abuse), relational impacts (e.g., better relations with co-workers, or spouse), and economic impacts.

Agencies and funders need to collaborate and reach agreement on what impacts can be reasonably expected. For example, in times of high unemployment it might not be reasonable to expect that all people who participate in a work search program will end up finding employment. In times of lower unemployment, or in geographic regions where the job market is robust, it might be more reasonable to expect high placement rates following completion of a work search program and also high retention rates for 6 months or 12 months because clients found personally meaningful work rather than accepting the first job offer.

### *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. In the framework depicted in Figure 1, intervention refers to any intentional activity implemented in the hopes of fostering client change. Interventions include the interactions of service providers with clients or third parties as well as the components of the programs and services that are instrumental in achieving the client outcomes.

We conceptualize two broad categories of interventions: generic and specific. Generic interventions are those actions that are common to most interactions between service providers and clients or third parties. For example, a strong working alliance between service provider and client has been shown to be important in facilitating client change, and developing a working alliance likely will be part of virtually all interventions. Similarly, teaching a client to reframe an unpleasant event and view it as an opportunity for growth could be part of several interventions and could contribute to achieving numerous client outcomes. Specific interventions are more singularly focused than generic interventions. They usually are linked directly to client goals and outcomes, or linked to interactions with third parties that are intended to foster client change. Specific interventions can be part of interactions with clients directly or they can be bundled together as part of programs and workshops.

*A framework for organizing specific interventions.* Based on standard practices and reports from the field, we suggest a framework for organizing the specific interventions that are used to initiate and/or sustain client change (see Figure 3). The first four categories (career decision making, skills enhancement, job search, and job maintenance) represent typical interventions used to achieve learning outcomes, although some of the bullet points depict client personal attributes that usually are by-products of learning the knowledge or skills involved. The fifth category, career-related personal development, pertains to interventions that are designed explicitly to address changes in personal attributes. We have included the term “career-related” in the title to acknowledge that most agencies offering career development services do not have a mandate to offer personal counselling, but when there is a personal issue, such as lack of self-confidence, that is affecting a client’s ability to pursue career goals, it is important to address that issue as part of the career intervention. The sixth category is for interventions that do not neatly fit into the other five categories: it is our way of acknowledging that an important and legitimate part of providing comprehensive career development services is to be able to recognize when someone may need to be referred, for example, to a detox program prior to beginning work aimed more directly at finding employment.

The categories in Figure 3 represent topics that are addressed in specific interventions. We have used topical headings as our organizing tool, recognizing that the topics might be addressed in programs or other services in a variety of different ways, for example, through counselling, teaching, workshop facilitation, guidance, and made available in a group setting, a classroom, through individual counselling, or guided self-help. Furthermore, different agencies may decide to address

some topic with different delivery mechanisms. The mandate of the agency, the expertise of the staff, and the learning styles of the clients typically all come into play when deciding how the interventions are implemented.

Figure 3

*Framework for organizing client change interventions*

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**1. Career decision making**

- Self-awareness of occupational interests, relevant aptitudes, personal values, job-related skills, adaptability skills
- How to find and use labour market information
- Knowledge of community resources
- Awareness of alternative employment options
- Adaptability in range of options considered

**2. Work-specific skills enhancement**

- Specific employment skill training (certificate or training program completed)
- Skills for creating opportunities
- Self-management skills
- Literacy skills
- Numeracy skills
- Computer skills

**3. Work search**

- How to identify and follow-up on job leads
- Preparing résumé and cover letter
- Self-presentation skills
- Job interview skills
- Ability to negotiate appropriate employment contract

**4. Job maintenance**

- Acquiring information about job entitlements
- Knowledge of factors contributing to job loss
- Conflict resolution skills
- Overall work habits

**5. Career-related personal development**

- Building self-efficacy (e.g., self-confidence, motivation, belief that change is possible)
- Skills for managing life demands (e.g., stress control, time management, financial management, interpersonal skills, coping with psychological effects of job loss)
- Managing transitions (e.g., flexibility and adaptability)
- Becoming more aware of employment opportunities
- Becoming more self-directed

**6. Other**

- Referral
- Psychological assessment

*Quality service factors.* Even though quality service factors do not link directly to client outcomes, they are important to address. To illustrate, a client who gets rude treatment from a receptionist and encounters a dismissive attitude by a group facilitator will likely not achieve the best outcomes, even from a very good program. Thus, even though some processes cannot be linked directly to client outcomes, they are important to track. The list of such factors that agencies and practitioners expressed a desire to measure include the following: client satisfaction,

stakeholder satisfaction, employer satisfaction, level of service utilization, number of applicants for services, client relationship with the agency (clients return for service, clients are self reliant, etc.), time required for service provision, agency reputation, and ability to fund-raise. Quality service factors are sometimes thought of as outcomes; however, they are not indicators of client change, per se. Therefore, we suggest that they be regarded as indicators of successful processes.

One difficulty in using an “Inputs → Processes → Outcomes” model is deciding where to put outputs. Outputs usually refer to things such as quality of service, client flow, scope of services, types of client problems, and so on. If we include these sorts of variables in the “outcomes” category, they get confused with indicators of client change. Therefore, we suggest including them in “processes” as they are not really indicators of client change, but indicators that appropriate processes have been followed. Thus, processes become all the activities that agencies, clients, third parties, and so on engage in; to evaluate the processes, we gather evidence on counsellor and client adherence to the intervention plan, and also client satisfaction with the service, agency adherence to mandate, numbers of clients seen, and so on.

### *Inputs*

Inputs refer to the resource base that an agency can access to deliver career services. The amount and scope of resources that an agency can access has a large influence on the agency’s ability to offer quality services. A framework for organizing input variables is not elaborated in this article, because those factors were not assessed in the national survey or the Alberta study cited earlier. The system for organizing inputs undoubtedly will be revised and elaborated as the draft evaluation framework is field tested. However, we offer as a starting point the following framework for tracking inputs: staff (number of staff, competencies of staff, staff level of training, type of training), funding level, infrastructure (facilities, support staff, consultants), and community resources (other professionals, physical resources such as libraries, internet cafes, etc.). Documenting inputs is an important part of demonstrating cost-effective service delivery and making sure that an agency had a resource base adequate to achieve the outcomes that are expected.

#### USING THE DRAFT EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The three elements in Figure 1 can be thought of as related in a linear way, but the relationship is not strictly linear. Inputs feed processes and processes result in outcomes. However, outcomes are also influenced by the inputs available, and the nature of the inputs (especially the competencies of the staff) influence the process that can be enacted. Thus, even though Figure 1 depicts a linear relationship, in reality the three elements are very interactive.

In order to perform a comprehensive evaluation, all three elements need to be examined and 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. Thus, an evaluation plan needs to describe the inputs (both the nature of the inputs and the amount available) and link the inputs to the processes followed. Evidence needs to be gathered on the processes that were enacted so that a link can be made between the outcomes obtained and the processes that were used to obtain those outcomes. Ultimately, it is useful to be able to have evidence that will support a claim that these outcomes were obtained because those processes were followed, and we could follow those processes because we had such and such in our resource base. Agencies that routinely gather these sorts of data have an easy time addressing accountability concerns, especially if the evidence gathering is integrated into service delivery.

An important part of evidence-based practice involves documenting the processes followed by both service providers and service recipients, as well as any significant others that potentially could be affecting the achievement of outcomes. In order to claim that an intervention is responsible for producing a client outcome, it is important to be able to say with confidence that both service provider and client have followed the intervention plan. There are many examples in the career development field where an intervention appears to be ineffective, but closer scrutiny reveals that the intervention plan was in fact not followed.

An important next step in developing a comprehensive evaluation plan is to map the client learning outcomes onto the interventions. Agencies will need to be very clear about the client outcomes that they want to be held accountable for, and then to identify where in the programs or services they offer the components are that are likely to produce those outcomes. This mapping will need to be quite detailed and likely will be quite specific to an agency or a program, but using a common framework to identify the outcomes and the interventions will help to identify what outcomes are reasonable to expect from the services being offered.

Finally, 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 the outcomes. After the processes are elaborated, it is sensible to look at the inputs that will be needed in order to implement the process. Some agencies may have limitations on their inputs, especially in matters relating to budget or to the credentials of their service providers, including the other community resources that are available. Those sorts of factors may restrict the interventions or programs that can be implemented, and subsequently the outcomes that can be achieved; by implication, it may also mean that additional resources will be needed in order to implement a program successfully. We emphasize this point because programs are often designed without explicit expectations for the outcomes that are intended to be achieved. We believe that the program development process should begin by articulating the client needs that are intended to be met by the program, then identifying the specific types of client changes that are intended to result from participation in the program (i.e., the intended client outcomes). After

the outcomes are clear, then the program content and accompanying processes can be developed and the evaluation plan can be elaborated.

Implementing an evaluation model like the one described in this article will involve a shift in thinking for many agency managers and service providers. To demonstrate the value of career services and address the “show me the evidence” challenge, the question “What are we going to do?” will always need to be asked in conjunction with the question “How will we tell how well it is working?” Thus, the program plan and the evaluation plan need to be developed together and implemented at the same time. This is somewhat of a departure from normal practice in many circles, but is likely a necessary consideration when the focus is on evidence-based practice and outcome-focused intervention.

#### SUMMARY

In the research described in the opening pages of this article, respondents expressed frustration that client contextual factors and societal impacts typically were not seen as relevant for evaluation. Respondents also identified many important outcomes that went unmeasured or unreported. Funders and policy makers acknowledged that career services were important, but lamented that there was insufficient evidence to support the funding levels that were being requested. The evaluation framework described in this article has the potential to satisfy the concerns of both parties, because it encompasses a focus on both evidence-based practice and outcome-focused intervention. We believe that the model is easy to understand, robust enough to encompass most aspects of career development services, and easily incorporated into the practices of agencies and service providers. Field testing is currently in progress with a number of agencies, and reports on the adequacy of the framework will begin to appear in the near future.

In closing, we reiterate a point made earlier, that any comprehensive plan for evaluating the effectiveness of career development interventions needs to incorporate a systematic method for gathering data on all three components of the framework we are proposing. In order to get an accurate picture of which interventions work best, with which clients, under which circumstances, it is necessary to examine the client outcomes, the processes used to obtain those outcomes, and the inputs needed to enact the processes.

Please note that the framework presented in this article is a draft, intended for discussion and further refinement by the career development community. In field testing the framework described in this article, we particularly want users to ask themselves “How will this approach fit in our work place?” and “What changes need to be made in the framework in order for it to more adequately address the unique needs of our work place?” We expect that the organizing categories in the framework will change as the framework is tested in the field. Thus, this is a dynamic framework that is very much a work in progress, and one that the CRWG will revise as needed to accommodate user feedback and the realities that exist in the field.

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