

Addressing Client Needs The Optimal Sequence of Employment Programs and Services

Valerie G. Ward

Valerie G. Ward Consulting Ltd.

Dr. Dorothy I. Riddle

Service-Growth Consultants Inc.

August 2015

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Based on Employment Readiness Scale™ research. For further information, contact Valerie Ward at valeriegward@gmail.com or 604-886-8905

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Context

In working with agencies licensed to use the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS), the question of employment service delivery design is frequently raised. This issue becomes ever more critical as staff resources become tighter and demand for services increases. Research shows that clients now face a labour market environment in which employers are reluctant to interview applicants who have been unemployed more than six months (Hartford 2014). So there is pressure from several directions to be as efficient as possible in assisting clients.

Further, the ERS data on over 130,000 Canadians indicate that targeting clients to the interventions most specifically tailored to their needs results in more significant improvements in employment readiness. Data in Table 1 show the results of two types of intervention for clients needing extensive assistance (i.e., “Not Ready”). Not surprisingly, clients referred to Career Exploration interventions were significantly more likely to become self-sufficient on Career Decision-Making, while those referred to Job Search interventions were significantly more likely to become self-sufficient on job search skills.

Table 1: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Becoming Self-Sufficient

Percent of “Not Ready” Clients	Type of Intervention	
	Career Exploration	Job Search
Becoming self-sufficient on:		
Career decision-making	46%	28%
Job search skills	33%	42%

Source: Database of ERS Canadian data, 29 July 2015.

In July 2015, based on ERS data analysis and feedback from licensees, the feedback portion of the ERS was restructured to reflect the dynamics described below.

Sequencing Employability Factors

There are four employability factors that are critical for preparing clients to manage their work life, the first three of which it makes sense to attend to in a linear sequence: first individuals need to choose a type of work or career focus, then they acquire the education and skills necessary to pursue that type of work, and then they can begin to search for work. Table 2 shows the increasing percentage of clients requiring assistance as one moves from Career Decision-Making to Job Search.

There can be a temptation to focus assistance on job search skills because the largest number of clients need this type of help (see Table 2). But if clarifying career choice and

ensuring that the needed skills and qualifications are in place don't happen first, job search will ultimately be unsuccessful.

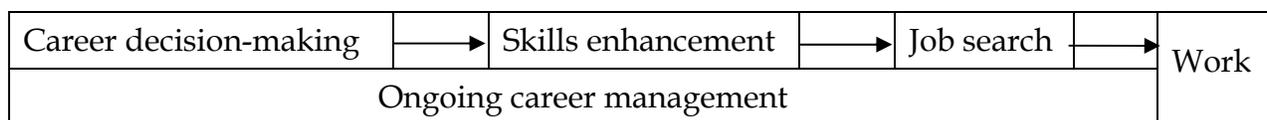
Table 2: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Needing Assistance on Employability Factors

Factor	Percent of “Not Ready” Clients” Needing Assistance				
	Clients with Disabilities	Visible Minorities	Age 19-24	Age 46-65	All Clients
Career decision-making	75	70	69	70	70
Skills enhancement	76	70	64	74	68
Job search	88	88	86	85	86
Ongoing career mgmt.	88	88	90	86	88

Source: Database of ERS Canadian data, 29 July 2015.

The fourth employability factor, Ongoing Career Management, is the ability to manage transitions between jobs and occupational fields. It is critical not only for managing work life in an environment where having an increasing number of work transitions over one’s life span is becoming the norm but also to prevent clients from cycling back onto assistance when those changes occur. In order to optimize clients’ ability to navigate the world of work, it is important that they also build ongoing career management skills. Research has shown that Canadians now average 15 jobs during their working life (Harris 2014), and 41 percent of Canadians have had three or more different areas of occupational focus (Workopolis 2014).

Addressing employability factors could be visualized in the following manner, combining the sequential focus on the first three employability factors with the gradual strengthening of the ability to manage one’s ongoing work life:



While the above diagram depicts a linear progression, it is recognized that individuals frequently return to career decision-making and subsequent steps at transition points when they wish to re-evaluate their career direction.

Strengthening Soft Skills

Built into the ERS is the measurement of the five soft skills most critical for work life success, which help individuals to manage challenges and support effective performance in work life:

- *Self-Efficacy*: a sense of being able to perform well (a component of self-esteem).
- *Outcome Expectancy*: whether or not a client expects to succeed and is willing to take responsibility for creating that success.

- o *Social Supports*: the client’s network of support and ability to get help.
- o *Work History*: the client’s feeling that they have performed well in past work contexts, paid or unpaid.
- o *Job Maintenance*: having the interpersonal and self-management skills to be able to keep work once found.

While all of these soft skills are important, Self-Efficacy stands out as most critical to strengthen first as it affects every aspect of the process of becoming employment ready. Clients who are weak on Self-Efficacy will limit the types of work they feel able to perform, will have more difficulty learning, and will interview poorly due to a lack of self-confidence. Outcome Expectancy is equally important as, together with Self-Efficacy, it measures motivation and it represents the feeling of potency to bring about change. Any change process is difficult, and so having a support network is also crucial to provide both information and moral support.

Work History – the client’s perception of their previous work experience – becomes important as the client moves into planning for job search. In order to ensure a positive work experience, it is important that clients weak on Work History select employers who will provide good orientation and supervision to help the client succeed. Similarly, Job Maintenance needs to be strong before the client begins looking for work to help ensure that the client is able keep a job once obtained. In the three years of field research undertaken in developing the ERS, it became clear that self-sufficiency in Job Maintenance was the single best predictor of success in work life (Ward & Riddle 2001).

ERS data in Table 3 show that while clients with disabilities are the most likely to need help with strengthening soft skills (particularly Self-Efficacy, Outcome Expectancy, and Job Maintenance), over half of all “Not Ready” clients require assistance with at least four of the five soft skills. Visible minorities and clients 46-65 years old are the most likely to need help with Social Supports, or creating a network for themselves, while those aged 19-24 are most likely to need help with Work History.

Table 3: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Needing Assistance with Soft Skills

Factor	Percent of “Not Ready” Clients” Needing Assistance				
	Clients with Disabilities	Visible Minorities	Age 19-24	Age 46-65	All Clients
Self-Efficacy	75	65	66	64	67
Outcome Expectancy	52	44	36	43	40
Social Supports	69	72	59	76	67
Work History	72	73	77	66	72
Job Maintenance	61	51	49	51	50
Total Soft Skills	66	61	57	60	59

Source: Database of ERS Canadian data, 29 July 2015.

Turning to data on the impact of interventions on strengthening soft skills, data in Table 4 show that clients are most likely to strengthen soft skills through Career

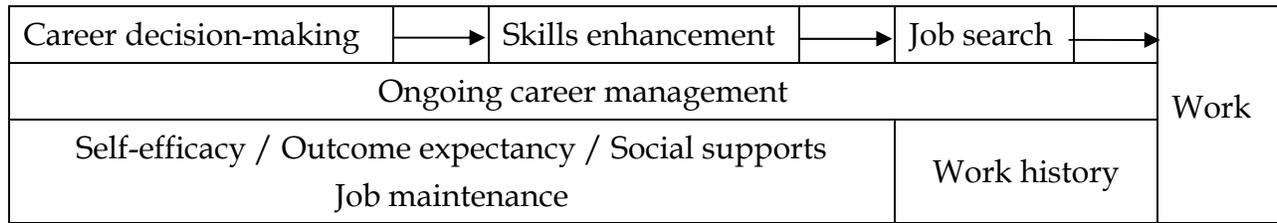
Exploration interventions, but that 25 percent of “Not Ready” clients score as still weak on soft skills at the end of the intervention. Ironically, Life Skills interventions that theoretically should strengthen soft skills left 40 percent of clients still not yet strong overall on soft skills.

Table 4: Percent of All Clients “Left Behind” on Total Soft Skills

Intervention Type	Percent of All Clients “Left Behind”				
	Clients with Disabilities	Visible Minorities	19-24 Years Old	46-65 Years Old	All Clients
Career Exploration	30	18	24	34	25
Job Search	34	27	31	26	29
Life Skills	39	26	28	38	40

Source: Database of ERS Canadian data, 29 July 2015.

The sequence for assisting clients with soft skills could be visualized as linked to the sequence with employability factors as follows:



Addressing Challenges

All of us face challenges in our lives that may serve as apparent obstacles or barriers to what we want to accomplish. These range from personal issues such as health or a criminal record to responsibilities that appear to preclude work activities to structural impediments such as a lack of affordable housing. In the design of employment programs and services there is often an assumption that having multiple challenges or barriers (sometimes referred to as life stabilization issues) means that an individual could not perform well in a work role.

During the development of the ERS it became clear that the primary issue that barriers or challenges pose to employment readiness is the stress that may be generated in managing them. Without a high level of stress, clients were usually able to problem solve and find ways to manage the barriers they faced. So it is not the presence or absence of the challenge per se but rather one’s success in coping with the challenge that is significant.

One of the interesting findings in the ERS data is the documentation that clients at all levels of readiness do face challenges that, if unresolved, could interfere with work life success. An implication of the data presented in Table 5 is that assistance with

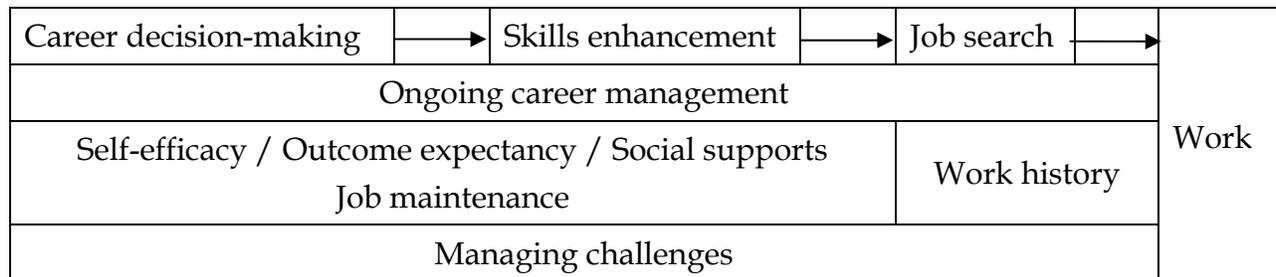
challenges or barriers needs to be viewed as parallel to assistance with employability factors and soft skills rather than as precursors to addressing employment readiness.

Table 5: Percent of Clients Needing Help with Challenges

Level of Employment Readiness	Percent Needing Help with Challenges
Fully Ready	72%
Minimally Ready	82%
Not Ready	92%

Source: Database of Canadian ERS data, 29 July 2015.

Combining challenges with employability factors and soft skills, the following intervention sequence emerges:



Conclusion

To help clients move into successful employment as quickly as possible, it is most efficient and effective to sequence the assistance appropriately. It is important that clients are clear on a career direction and have the supporting skills and qualifications before they are placed in a job search intervention. Soft skills need to be strong before job search begins. Perhaps most importantly, we have seen that the challenges or barriers that could interfere with a successful work life can come into play for any client and are optimally addressed in parallel with employability factors and soft skills. By providing a clear sequence of assistance, staff can streamline and maximize the impact of their work in assisting clients to achieve successful employment transitions.

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