A Systems Analysis Of Factors Which Lead To The Successful Employment Of People With A Disability.

Outcomes measures for the success or otherwise of disability employment services is based purely on job placements. Little research has been carried out to determine what personal factors influence outcomes and the role of the current system. Anecdotal evidence from service providers suggest that the system itself may be a barrier to better outcomes for people with disabilities.

Research into the role of the disability employment consultant and their impact on outcomes has been inconclusive (Migliore, Hall, Butterworth & Winsor, 2010; Schneider, 2008).

This research project seeks to examine the personal and environmental factors of the client and consultant that influence employment outcomes and whether the current system supports or militates against better employment outcomes.

Background.

The role of the disability employment consultant is to assist people with a disability find employment in the "open labour market" by addressing barriers to employment and providing appropriate supports to ensure successful long term employment (Migliore, Hall, Butterworth & Winsor, 2010; Schneider, 2007; Yun-Tung, 2010). The disability employment consultant is seen as an emerging professional vocation, however little is known about the work practices of this profession.

A number of researchers (Migliore et al., 2010; Schneider, 2007; Yun-Tung, 2010; Wehman, Revell & Brooke, 2003) have attempted to identify the work practices of the profession and whether there is a consistent approach in the application of evidence based practice when working with clients. To date the literature shows no consistent conceptual basis or methodology at work. Issues such as employment consultant attitude, work environment, subjective assessment processes and setting are some of the possible factors that have not been explored.

The disability employment consultant plays a vital role in supporting people with a disability in the workplace, however little is known about whether disability employment consultants are using evidence based practices in the workplace (Drake & Bond, 2008; Migliore et al., 2010; Leucking, Fabian & Tilson, 2004). The inability to define a set of evidence based practices that can be applied by disability employment consultants may be a contributing factor to the wide variety of employment practices evidenced worldwide. Practices based on philosophy, value system or possible prejudicial attitudes, rather than evidence may be a barrier to the effective implementation of employment support (Wehman et al., 2003).

The literature to date has identified a number of possible characteristics and evidence based practices that in use. However, no one has been able to
demonstrate conclusively which set of characteristics and evidence based practices are universally applicable and which form the basis for consistent practice within the disability employment sector.

The principles of normalisation (Nirje, 1973; Wolfensburger 1972) have been an influence on service providers for a number of decades. It has been suggested that this has led to some disability employment practices which have an expectation that the person with the disability should be able to complete all the tasks required of an able bodied worker (Wilson, 2003). More careful job matching of the person’s talents/capacities to specific job requirements, together with accommodation to the person’s physical or cognitive impairments, generally lead to successful outcomes.

The emergence of the disability employment consultant as a profession is still very much in its infancy. Few professional bodies exist to define or promote the profession (Schneider, 2007). Research into the profession found that staff are grouped under no less than eighteen job titles and that staff identified twenty four key activities that they may undertake (Schneider, 2007).

Employment specialists have indicated that the appropriateness of their efforts in matching preferences, were impacted by pressure to meet organisation goals and the standards set by their immediate supervisors and their employers (Kostick, et al., 2010). Inappropriate placements that do not match the client’s interests and goals are often cited as an outcome of agencies’ pressure and poor interagency co-operation (Kostick et al., 2010).

The attitudes and beliefs of the employment consultant have been shown to be a factor in employment success (Fabian, Simonsen, Buchanan & Leucking, 2011). It was found that consultants with less than five years experience believed that employers needed to be sold on the concept of hiring people with disabilities, whilst those with more than five years experience focused on business needs when looking for placements. They concluded that closer attention to the belief systems of newer consultants needed to be examined in order to address this inconsistency. This has clear implications for the sector in Australia, where staff turnover is high, further highlighting the level of disability awareness amongst disability employment staff, who may share similar values and attitudes to employers.

The literature reviewed highlights both areas of agreement and disagreement regarding our current understanding of disability employment practice. What is clear is that there is little understanding of the role of the disability employment consultant and their relationship to disability service provider clients.

The competing agendas of fiscal responsibility versus social responsibility suggest a system that is not keeping pace with evidence concerning good practice. The apparent push by the federal government for disability service providers to be person centred in their approach highlights the disparity between actual evidence based practices and rhetoric.
There is a gap between economic imperatives and evidence based practices highlighting the need for further research into what type of operating system would need to exist to allow for sound person centred practices. A system that incorporates person centred principles may allow consultants to operate in a manner that truly respects the disability client, their dreams, goals and aspirations, whilst at the same time meeting the government’s economic agenda.

The research to date concerning the operating environment has focused on the shift in economic philosophy and has largely ignored the actual operating environment. With the coming of the NDIS, an examination of what constitutes an appropriate operating system is a matter of urgency.

In examining the literature I have been able to distinguish over twenty themes. What is clear from this is that there is no real understanding of what constitutes good practice by disability employment consultants. Some of the outcomes, such as inclusion and integration show disagreement on the validity of measures to date, whilst other areas such as work experience where there is good evidence, are not universally seen in disability employment service practice as an imperative in assisting the client to set employment goals.

Much of the literature reviewed has demonstrated a variety of good practices, but none have been able to comprehensively provide evidence of what constitutes evidence-based practice that disability employment consultants could employ. It is my view that research into the actual practices of employment consultants would provide answers and in turn guidelines for practice. This would need to be measured against what disability employment service clients see as important to them.

In light of the evidence that there is no real understanding of person centred principles within the disability employment service providers, further research into what constitutes appropriate training, skills and knowledge is warranted.

In examining the literature it is clear that there is a need to bring together current evidence-based practices, current disability employment practices and develop a new understanding of theory and turn that into applied practice that is evidence-based and practical. A clear set of practice guidelines, that take into account the disability employment service clients, both the employer and future employee and the disability employment service consultant is overdue.

However, any research that produces new evidence-based guidelines would only reach its potential if these practices were to take place in a system that allows consultants to practice without the undue influence of federal government economic imperatives. Whilst not advocating for a complete disregard for fiscal responsibility it is my view that system change that promotes better employment service practices, whilst supporting the disability employment consultant is a necessary part of the promotion of improved practices. Better practices that reflect a better understanding of how people with a disability should be supported will lead to better fiscal outcomes.
In order for the system to be fully responsive to the needs of people with a disability there is a need to involve them in this research. Indeed given the current climate of new advocacy it is an imperative.

**Research Question.**

**What are the facilitators and barriers to the successful open employment of people with disabilities?**

This research aims to identify factors that influence successful open employment outcomes for people with disabilities by examining both the participants and the disability employment service system administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

This research aims to examine the following domains:

- the disability employment service client or person with a disability and their employer
- the disability employment service consultant and their employer
- the disability employment service system, including the employer, DEEWR and disability employment peak bodies.

It is proposed to undertake an examination of the individual characteristics of different disability types, their employment outcomes, supports, their measures of success and impact on quality of life and any barriers that they perceive as having hindered their movement to employment.

Disability employment consultants that have a history of successfully supporting people with disabilities into sustainable long term open employment will be interviewed to determine if there are specific characteristics, personality traits or other factors, including training, that are common across consultants that may be predictors for success amongst consultants.

At a system level, disability employment service providers, peak bodies and DEEWR will be interviewed to determine what factors are present within the system that prevent or support the successful operation of services that maximise the possibility of employment outcomes. This will also extend to interviewing employers of the people with disabilities who have achieved long term employment.

**Method.**

Study participants will be drawn from service providers which agree to participate. From this group, their ability to participate will be measured against known service outcome measures to ensure that organisations that participate have a history of successful outcomes. Individual participants will be recruited from the organisation staff and client base that have a history of long term employment and support. All participants will be involved in the study on a voluntary basis. Long term is defined as more than 24 months of continuous
employment for the purpose of this study. This will provide a qualitative base for the mixed method research, whilst quantitative data will be collected from the wider employer network using electronic means. Peak bodies will assist in the recruitment of participants. The process of developing survey research questions will commence with a small scale pilot sampling to test the validity of the questions.

**Data Collection.**

Data will be collected through semi-structured interview and questionnaire. Data collection will take place at disability employment service sites and if required at disability employment client workplace, if permission is available. Quantitative data will be collected electronically using online survey methods using the peak body member networks.

Data collection will commence with disability employment consultants in stage one. Stage two will involve interviews with persons with a disability who have been identified as having a history of successful employment. Stage three will involve data collection from service provider CEO / management and the collection of quantitative data. The final stage will involve interviews with peak bodies and government.

**Data Analysis.**

The mixed methodology will best address the research questions by providing different perspectives (McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter & Burton-Smith, 2008). The analysis will focus on identifying the key themes and their interrelationships that emerge from the interview data. To this end, data analysis through open and axial coding will assist in identifying key themes and the relationships among these themes.

Quantitative data analysis will be undertaken to test for differences in responses concerning factors leading to successful employment outcomes. After initial univariate, bivariate and correlational analyses, multi-level multivariate analyses will be undertaken with adequate adjustment for confounding variables.

**Outcomes.**

The research seeks to add to the limited amount of evidence regarding the practices of disability employment in Australia. There is an expectation that the research may lead to workforce tools that may improve the capacity of service providers to improve outcomes by appropriately matching consultant types with disability types. It is further expected that the research may highlight areas for change within the system that will enhance the capacity of service providers to improve outcomes inline with client expectations. This is seen as beneficial in the evolution of the current system, particularly in light of the government objective of achieving person centred approaches.
Research Personnel.

The research is being undertaken by Peter Smith, with supervision provided by Emeritus Professor Trevor Parmenter, Professor Patricia O’Brien and Assoc. Professor Vivienne Riches.

The research has ethics approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney.

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