

Labor Market Information Tools for Career Exploration: The North Dakota Model of LMI Training for Clients

By LOIS JOY

The Job-Driven Toolkits contain resources on promising and emerging job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR).



The North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NDVR) is a combined agency housed in the North Dakota Department of Human Services. The Job-Driven Technical Assistance Center (JDVRTAC) provided intensive technical assistance to the agency to reach their goal of improving the use of labor market information (LMI) throughout the agency.

North Dakota DVR Interviewees

Jeff Jenkins, MEd

Career Assessment Specialist, Fargo

Twyla Hofer

Rehabilitation Technician, Minot

Sheri Whitmire

Career Assessment Specialist, Bismarck

Introduction

The goal of this project by North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (NDVR) Job-Driven Technical Assistance Center (JDVRTAC) was to shorten the time between the determination of client eligibility and job placement. To reach this goal, the three largest VR offices in North Dakota developed and implemented a unique LMI training model. Instead of only training staff on how to use labor market information tools, VR professionals in Fargo, Minot, and Bismarck began to train VR clients themselves how to use LMI tools for career exploration and job search.

According to the three VR professionals we interviewed, training clients on the use of LMI technologies for career search gives them the power of choice and self-direction. It puts clients in the driver's seat of their search for job opportunities.

Once trained on the LMI tools, clients are no longer dependent on counselors to embark on career explorations and job search. Jeff Jenkins, a career assessment specialist in Fargo, stated that when clients are trained to conduct career research on their own, they become more invested in their job search.

Before the training was implemented, clients

had to wait up to 60 days between intake and the determination of eligibility to start the career exploration process with their counselors. With the new training, clients are trained to start their own career exploration much earlier in the process. This early self-driven career exploration keeps clients engaged, informed, and empowered to investigate careers and job opportunities during what otherwise would be a lag time in the process.

Today, when clients have their first meeting with counselors, they have already done up to 3 weeks of career exploration. They go into their first meeting with their counselor with career ideas and the start of a job search plan, which makes their first meeting more productive.

Transition to the new model did not require major changes in ongoing agency services or practices. VR staff in North Dakota were already using LMI tools, including the North Dakota Department of Labor Jobs Site and the Federal Department of Labor's O*NET, to help clients explore career opportunities (recently, VR staff have also started using the Career Index Plus, a national job search engine). The shift came when, instead of conducting career exploration and job searches for their clients, they began to teach clients how to use these tools themselves.

In Fargo and Bismarck, where staffers have a computer lab in the office, training is done in small-groups. In Minot, where they do not have a computer lab, the training is done one-on-one. During the training, clients learn to find information about job skills and educational requirements, current and future openings, typical wages, and job postings in their region.

Outside of these trainings, the VR computer labs in Fargo and Bismarck are open for drop-in use, so that clients can experiment with the different tools to establish their career goals and job search strategies. According to Sheri Whitmire, a career assessment specialist in Bismarck, ***"The training model is powerful because it gives clients the technology to make career decisions for themselves."***

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ExploreVR is a project of the Institute for
Community Inclusion at UMass Boston.



The other services provided by VR staffers continued in conjunction with the new training model, including setting up and conducting mock interviews, arranging job shadow opportunities, organizing workshops on resume writing and online posting, and interviewing. But now, clients are in a position to use the LMI tools themselves to steer their career explorations, goals, and strategies.

Career and business specialists supplement the information clients glean from the LMI searches with business intelligence gathered through employer interviews and relationships. Teaching LMI search techniques to clients doesn't replace these other services, but complements them.

Training Model

1. Client referred by VR counselor for career assessment and LMI exploration.
2. Small group and one-on-one instruction to teach LMI tools for career exploration.
3. After the determination of eligibility, client meets with counselors to clarify and further develop their individual plan for employment based on the information gathered through their initial self-career exploration.

The staffers we interviewed created the training materials and curriculum to help clients navigate the LMI tools, including a worksheet to help focus information gathering. For each occupation, the worksheet directs clients to collect key data points, including job duties, education requirements, wages, and annual/current job openings. Focusing on these key data points helps clients to focus their searches and make sense of what otherwise might be an overwhelming amount of information.

According to Jeff, ***"The way I teach LMI to clients is to keep it as simple as possible to be effective. I don't show clients too many data points."***

The worksheet encourages clients to start with what is most important and necessary. Once clients become more familiar with the tools, many will expand the information they collect to include other variables.

Training can be individualized for the clients as needed. For example, now that they are using the Career Index Plus, some clients may need to learn how to set up a free email address, while others will learn how to get postings sent to their phones.

Once a client has pinpointed some jobs they want to apply for, VR staff bring in business intelligence gathered from meetings with employers to further

assist clients in contacting companies where they found the job opening and identifying other employers with similar job openings. And when the job seeker is ready to apply, as noted above, there are workshops in writing cover letters, preparing resumes (online), mock interviews, and job shadowing.

Twyla Hofer, a rehabilitation technician in Minot, said the feedback she has received from clients about the training is overwhelmingly positive: ***"Once they learn the tools and realize it is not so difficult, they find it very helpful, even enjoyable, to explore. There are computers in the offices that are for clients' use. Once they get the ease of logging in, they become independent."***

Benefits of the Model

After using the "train the client" model for 2 years, the VR staffers have seen many benefits. First, clients are better prepared to discuss their career goals when they meet with counselors, because they have initiated the career exploration process. By the time they have their first meeting after eligibility with their counselor, they have already had a chance to use the LMI tools to explore opportunities, required training, and typical wages in their career areas of interest. Bringing all this information to the counselor makes their first meeting more productive.

Twyla has received positive feedback from counselors about the new training model, because ***"Counselors have seen how clients are more involved in developing their own plan."***

Second, the training keeps clients engaged in the job search during the time between intake and eligibility determination. Before the new training process, clients had to wait up to 60 days after intake to see if they were eligible to receive services. During this time, since clients didn't have the tools to embark on career exploration, they were less engaged. Now, clients receive the LMI training during the 60 days so they can use the time to explore career options on their own and with the support of VR staffers.

According to Sheri, ***"From the beginning of our work with clients, we match interests and skills with employer demand, learn about different career options, and marry assessments with career exploration."***

Third, training clients to use the LMI tools empowers them to take charge of their own career exploration process. Clients can use the information they collect to decide for themselves what careers are a good fit based on their

interests, skills, experiences, and where they want to live.

VR staff find that when clients use labor market tools to learn about careers on their own – rather than having a counselor inform them about career opportunities – they are in a better position to make their own choices about which career to pursue, and become more enthusiastic about the job search process. Jeff also noted that the tools enable clients **“to set more realistic goals...based on the information that they gathered.”**

Results

While it is too early to measure long-term impact on employment outcomes, the VR professionals we interviewed have seen signs of early success. They told us that with the new training model, clients who are more involved with their own career exploration may establish a career goal faster.

Also, clients seem to have more confidence in their ability to research and find a job. The self-search process may lead to choosing a career that is a better fit. And if a job doesn't turn out to be a good match, clients have the skills to initiate their own career exploration to find their next opportunity.

As Sheri noted, **“We don't seem to be getting as many return clients because they have the skills to find their next job.”**

In addition, the training can broaden expectations about what is possible. The VR professionals reported that the clients often enjoyed using LMI tools to explore careers, including new opportunities that had not previously considered.

Summing up what she sees as benefits of the training, Sheri said, **“Clients take ownership of their decisions. Clients find a plan that fits them so you are not butting heads. They have an understanding from the data of what is out there and skills needed. It gives them personal responsibility. And they have a job goal and plan quicker than sitting on it. They get them into a plan as fast as possible with the right information so they can start working on other things.”**

Interested in this model? Here are some tips:

1. **Get leadership support.** This will ensure the model is spread across the state, and that career specialists and rehabilitation technicians are recognized for their new roles and responsibilities.

2. **Be open.** Things are going to change a little, and you have to be flexible.
3. **Help leadership establish clear and measurable goals for this initiative.** Everyone should know what the agency is trying to achieve in terms of numbers, quality, and process.
4. **Identify a staff person in each region to lead the initiative.** This staffer should have an appropriate title and job responsibilities to support the work being done in this position.
5. **For the actual training, limit group size.** Small group training and one-to-one work better than large groups.
6. **Be patient with yourself and your colleagues.** Some counselors have a hard time adjusting to this model. For them, it may take a little extra effort to show how this approach may benefit their work with clients and make their jobs a little easier.

Resources

For additional resources used by North Dakota VR in their LMI Training for Clients model, please visit: www.explorevr.org/content/getting-more-people-employed-north-dakota-improving-business-engagement-and-utilizing-labor.

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