Regional Application of Standardized Performance Indicators for Supported Employment Programs

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Abstract

This paper reports on the collection and application of a set of standardized service delivery indicators within a network of twenty-three supported employment programs for people with developmental disabilities in Southwestern Ontario. The resulting data provides a profile of support services received and employment outcomes. Of 2,212 individuals with developmental disabilities seeking employment during the study period 58% were employed, most commonly in the service sector. Thirty percent of those people achieving continuous employment at year-end had achieved independence on the job. The number of people requiring supports for over one year was 60%, a marginal increase over the previous year. The results are discussed in terms of the economic viability of the supported employment model, as well as the potential contribution of this evaluation approach to performance benchmarking and service planning in this particular service sector.

With the growing emphasis on community involvement and integration for children and adults with developmental disabilities, supported employment has emerged as one of the critical components of the support services required for successful community living. (See Smith and Philippen (1999) for a recent overview of supported employment models and related characteristics.) Several studies have demonstrated a positive impact on people with developmental disabilities as a result of working in the community with support (Mank, Cioffi & Yovanoff, 1997; Pedlar, Lord & Van Loon, 1990). Other research demonstrates that people with developmental disabilities are generally satisfied with their employment in the community (Ochaka, Lord & Roth, 1994; Test, Hinson, Solow & Keul, 1993). Although segregated employment continues to be the norm in several jurisdictions, evidence suggests that integrated supported employment is increasing for people with developmental disabilities in Canada and the United States (Kiernan, Butterworth & McKaughey, 1995).

This increasing profile of supported employment for persons with developmental disabilities has resulted in the need for better evaluation data on the supported employment programs being implemented in the community. In response, a comprehensive evaluation model and instrument for such programs was previously developed by the authors (Lord & Rush, in press; Rush & Lord, this issue). The goals of this earlier project were to develop and test an evaluation model and instrument, and to support a network of service providers (for people with developmental disabilities) to use the model routinely for internal evaluation of their supported employment programs. While the project was not driven explicitly by an objective to formally benchmark each service provider to the normative performance of their peer organizations within the network, there was an explicit desire to standardize the information being collected at each site to facilitate some cross-site comparisons among the participating organizations. This paper reports on the application of one component of the evaluation model — the standardized service delivery indicators — across a large network of supported employment programs in Southwestern Ontario.Method

Service Delivery Indicators

"Employment" was defined in a manner consistent with the Employment Standards Act of Ontario; namely that the employment must pay minimum wage or higher and be in compliance with all the rights and responsibilities of an employee/employer relationship. This definition allows for the inclusion of self-employment under the same condition concerning earnings. Such a definition helps to draw a distinction between "supported work" and "supported employment". Consistent with current practice in the field of developmental disabilities (Smith & Philippen, 1999), "supported employment" was defined as the development of an individualized employment plan and ongoing training and support as required. It may also include other work-related supports, that is, arranging for and/or the provision of special equipment or workforce modifications, transportation or transportation training, teaching functional skills related to the social climate of the workplace, arranging for proper clothing or teaching personal hygiene.

The eleven service delivery indicators have been previously defined in Rush and Lord (this issue). Examples include the number of service recipients employed in the study period; job classification; average hours worked per week; and average hours of support per week. The information required for the calculation of the eleven data elements included information about the supported employment program as a whole (e.g., number of agreements; average wage of support workers), and information that must be summarized across each individual person (e.g., hours worked, wages earned). A number of the agencies involved in the present study utilized a computer program and manual developed specifically for this project to collect and summarize their data. Other agencies summarized the information by extracting the required data from their existing information systems.

Participating Programs

Twenty-three supported employment programs for people with developmental disabilities in Southwestern Ontario were included in the present study. The data analyzed was a consolidation of the data collected from all participating programs. The participating service providers varied from small, rural operations (e.g., one staff person supporting as few as eight people with developmental disabilities) to larger, urban services (e.g., twenty staff persons supporting upwards of two hundred and fifty people with developmental disabilities). Seven of the participating service providers could be considered to be generic in nature. That is, they support individuals with all types of disabilities, not just individuals with developmental disabilities. The rest provide services predominantly to persons with developmental disabilities. Fifty percent of the individuals involved in the study were reported to have a developmental disability as their primary disability.

Not all of the participating service providers conformed to the traditional supported employment model. Some provided very specialized services or services which represented only certain components of supported employment. Of these, the most notable were those agencies providing only job development. Most agencies, however, provided a complete range of services according to the supported employment model. This included pre-employment preparation and planning, job development, job coaching, and follow up services.

The participating programs were funded by a variety of sources. These included the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (those funding bodies mandated by both the Developmental Services Act and the Ontario Disability Support Act); Employment Supports Program; the Ontario Ministry of Health; and Human Resources Development Canada (through both the Employee Assistance Program and Opportunity Fund).

Data Collection Process

All 23 agencies collected and maintained their own individual service data according to commonly agreed upon definitions and parameters (Rush & Lord, this issue). Some of the service providers used the aforementioned custom designed database to collect their information while other agencies utilized their existing agency information systems. Some smaller agencies maintained their information manually based on client files and manual recording systems.

At the end of each twelve month reporting period (based on each agency's fiscal reporting), each agency completed a questionnaire that summarized their agency data along various service elements:

- Number of employment agreements
- Number of closed cases
- Number of people employed
- Job classifications
- Nature of disability
- Hours worked and earnings
- Support requirements

The completed questionnaires were submitted to an independent consultant who then compiled and analyzed the collected information. In this way, each agency was guaranteed confidentiality and an unbiased statistical summary. Individual agency data were not released to, or shared with, any other party. This was in response to service providers' need for assurance that their data (which essentially reflected performance levels based upon their agency's outcomes as compared to the outcomes of other agencies) could not be used in a punitive manner.

The data were compiled, using available Statistics Canada information, by geographic area (i.e., county) and totality (i.e., region). In most cases averages, or benchmarks, were then determined. In this way each agency could compare its results either to the county in which they operated, or, to the region as a whole. For one service indicator – job classification — the data were also compared to that of the general population in the region using National Occupational Codes.

Following the compilation and analysis in the first year's data (1998-1999), there was a desire to enhance the range of information that was being collected and to refine the data collection process. To this end, some additional information was added that went beyond the 11 service delivery indicators defined in the evaluation model. These related to a benefit-cost analysis of the service and to the support requirements for those persons with developmental disabilities who had achieved employment.

Results

Employment Through Employers

Service utilization. In 1999-2000, in the region under study, 2,212 individuals accessed the participating community supported employment programs for assistance to become employed (Table 1). This represented a 32% increase over the total in 1998-1999, which in turn had increased by 30% from the previous year. One thousand and ninety three, or 49%, of these cases were newly opened in the 1999-

2000 reporting period, a marginal increase from the figure of 46% reported in 1998-1999. In the 1999-2000 period, 760, or 34%, of all cases were closed, also representing a small increase over the figure of 30% reported closed cases in the previous year.

Table 1: Utilization of Regional Supported Employment Programs by Fiscal Year

	1998 - 1999	1999 - 2000
Total agreements (caseload)	1494	2212
Carry over from previous year	801	1119
New cases	693	1093
Closed cases	449	760
Cases open at end of year	1119	1452

Of the 760 closed cases in 1999-2000, 287 or 38% were closed because people had achieved independence in employment. This figure represented a decrease from the rate of 41% achieving independence in 1998-1999. A further fifty-seven individuals, or 7.5%, chose an alternate service option; 266, or 35%, left the agency; while 150, or 20%, did not give a reason for closing their cases.

The primary disabilities reported for the individuals who accessed supported employment programs over the period were as follows: 50% developmental disability, 21% psychiatric disability, 21% physical disability, 8% learning disability, 2% hearing impairment, 1% visual impairment, and 6% other.

Employment outcomes. Of the 2,212 individuals seeking employment with the assistance of the participating community programs, 1291, or 58%, were employed at some point during the period. Of the 1,452 participants still involved with the supported employment programs at the end of the year, 968, or 67%, were employed on an ongoing basis — up 2% over 1998-1999. Of those employed, 25%, or 323, individuals worked in temporary, seasonal, or short-term jobs. Forty two percent, or 921, program participants had no employment in the period. (Of note, no information was provided as to why this was the case.) However, 448 were still participating in other supported employment services, presumably in job preparation and/or job search.Of the 968 individuals who where in continuous, or on-going, employment through an employer at the end of the 1999-2000 reporting period, 36% had been employed for over one year. Another 39% had been employed between 3 and 12 months while 25% had been employed for less than 3 months (Figure 1)[1].

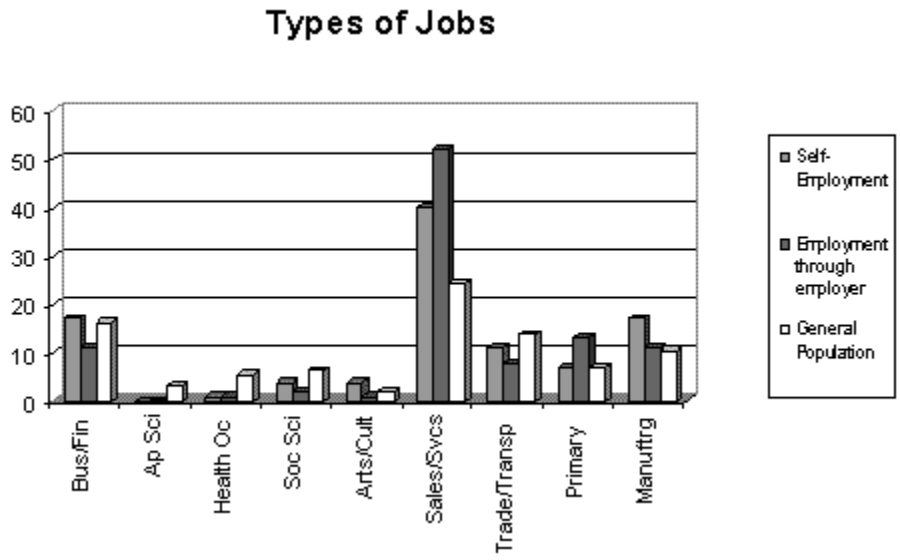
Figure 1: Duration of Employment for Traditionally and Self-Employed Individuals

Types of Jobs. In the most recent study period (1999-2000), most jobs obtained by persons with disabilities through the supported employment programs were based in the service sector. This was followed by employment in the sectors of primary industries, manufacturing and business, and finance (Figure 2). There was limited representation in the trades, health, social sciences, arts and culture sectors. There was no one reported as employed in the applied sciences sector. These results differ markedly with employment trends among the general population in the same region. For example, 52% of people with disabilities work in the service sector (where part-time hours and minimum wage are the norm), as compared to just over 24% in the general population. While we might speculate on the reasons for this (for example, the educational levels of persons with disabilities who access supported employment services), it is apparent that this sector representation has a significant impact on the earnings potential of persons with disabilities.

Supports required. Thirty percent of people with continuous employment at year-end had achieved independence on the job. This represented a 4% improvement over 1998-99. The number of persons who required supports that exceeded 12 months also increased, from 56% to 60%, in 1999-2000. Of this group, 59% had a developmental disability cited as their primary diagnosis — down 5% from 1998-1999. Of those that required long-term supports, 59% fell into the job maintenance category, requiring supports for less than 10% of their work time.Hours of work/remuneration. In a five-

week reporting period, persons with disabilities worked an average of 18.1 hours per week. While this is an increase of 2.6 hours per week over 1998-99, part-time employment continues to be the norm.

Figure 2: Types of Jobs for Traditionally and Self-Employed Individuals



The average wage rate for persons with disabilities in the region was $7.45 per hour. Based on an 18-hour work week, this equates to a weekly income of $140.00. When this level of employment in the five-week reporting period is extrapolated over the course of a full year, it suggests that there is the potential for people to earn $7,744 per year. After taxes and Ontario Disability Support Program – Income Support (ODSP-IS) reconciliation, this represents a net financial benefit to each worker of $289 per month, or $3,467 per year.

Self-Employment

Participation rates. A relatively small number of individuals were self-employed. While 42% of those people having employment agreements with the participating service providers had achieved on-going employment in the traditional job market, only 2% achieved on-going employment in a self-employment venture. However, continuous, or on-going, employment for individuals in self-employment

characterizes virtually 100% of those who pursue this option. Of the 5% of those persons in self-employment ventures reported as having any employment in the period, 5% also reported continuous employment at the end of the period.

Duration of employment. Individuals who were self-employed appeared to fare better than their counterparts in traditional employment, with respect to the longevity of their employment (Figure 1). For example, 54% of persons in self-employment had held their job for over 12 months compared to 35% of people in employment through an employer.

Types of jobs. In general, people in self-employment more closely mirrored the general population in terms of the job sectors in which they work. While they remain under-represented in the applied and social sciences, health occupations, and arts and culture sectors, their participation in the sales and service, business and finance, trades, and primary industries sectors was closer to the population norm of the group employed through an employer.

Nature of disability. As with those employed in more traditional employment arrangements, participation in self-employment arrangements was seen to occur most frequently for persons reported as having developmental disabilities (65%). This was followed by individuals reported as having physical and psychiatric disabilities who were represented equally at 12%. The next largest group represented in self-employment was persons reported to have learning disabilities (5%). Individuals with hearing and visual disabilities were represented at 2% and 1% respectively.

Hours of work/remuneration. Individuals who were self-employed earned 29% of the income that their counterparts in traditional employment earned. This is due to the fewer hours worked per week (9.1 hours vs. 18.9 hours, or 48%) and a lower average hourly wage rate ($4.83 vs. $7.87, or 61%). In making these calculations, wage rates below minimum were accepted for self-employment in the start-up years only provided there was the desire and intent to achieve minimum or higher earnings over time as the business grew.

Financial benefit to workers. Interestingly, with gross earnings at only 29% that of their counterparts in traditional employment, after all deductions and the ODSP-IS reconciliation, the net financial benefit to people in self-employment improves to 58% of that for people with disabilities in the traditionally employed group. The net income is $168 per month (and $2,010 per annum) for people in self-employment arrangements as opposed $289 (and $3,467 per annum) for those in traditional employment arrangements. This is due, in large measure, to the fact that this group pays little or no income tax, and they, typically, have not been able to reduce their dependence on ODSP-IS.

Preliminary Benefit-Cost Estimates

While the data gathered from the participating supported employment programs is insufficient to permit a comprehensive benefit-cost analysis, the information is sufficient to provide a preliminary estimate of the return on the societal investment in supported employment from an economic perspective.

When we combine the financial data for both traditional employment through employers and self-employment, the extrapolated annual earnings equal $7,278 per person per year. With an average income of $7,278 per person, the corresponding reduction of ODSP-IS is $3,582 per person per year. When this is calculated for all those with continuous employment it equates to a $3,467,666.00 payback to ODSP-IS annually in the region under study here. This calculation is based upon a single year's employment only. For all those who remain employed for longer periods with limited or no support, this outcome can only improve. Many of these individuals are also now paying federal and provincial income taxes as well as premiums to Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance. In addition, we have not tried to place an economic value on outcomes associated with improved quality of life in the community. Doing so would no doubt significantly increase the benefit to cost ratio.

While we do not have available the exact costs of the employment service system in the Southwest Region, it has been estimated at $4 million annually. With a $3,468,000.00 payback, the net annual cost is estimated at $532,000.00. A further case for benefit-cost might be made on the basis that if these individuals were not involved in supported employment programs, many would not be employed and would likely be dependent upon the system for an alternate support service. An alternate support model might cost the same $4 million or more, potentially without any payback to the system and community-at-large such as is provided by supported employment services.

Discussion

In the initial launch of this study, there were two primary goals. The first was to develop a more accurate picture of the supported employment model as implemented in this region of Ontario and the outcomes achieved. The second was to gain insight into the use of standard service delivery indicators as part of a larger program evaluation model developed for these programs (Lord & Rush, in press; Rush & Lord, 2002). An additional goal was to examine their use in service planning.

An Accurate Picture of the Supported Employment in the Region

Based upon the information collected, we can say that the "typical" person with a disability, living in Southwestern Ontario, who engages the services of a community

agency for assistance to find employment:

- works in the service sector an average of 18 hours per week and earns $7.75 per hour, or $7,278 per year
- has approximately $3,200 more disposable income per year than those who do not work
- requires support for less than 10% of the time that they work
- receives approximately $3,582 less per year in government support from the ODSP-IS program than others with disabilities who do not work
- contributes about $290 per person per year in federal and provincial income taxes, or $280,000 per year for the total group of persons supported by participating agencies in southwestern Ontario
- costs the taxpayer approximately $261 per person per year, or $252,334 per year for the total group of persons supported by participating agencies in southwestern Ontario

Standard Service Delivery Indicators as a Component of the Evaluation Model

In consolidating the data collected and averaging the elements, or indicators, across all participating programs, we have essentially created benchmarks, or standards, of service delivery. These benchmarks can be used by all agencies to compare their own results and to motivate them to meet, or surpass, the level of outcomes established by the benchmarks.

As more agencies reach and surpass the benchmarks, the standard should increase and improve over time. This engages the overall system in a process of continuous quality improvement. When an individual service provider participates in this process as a means of evaluating its own services and outcomes, it, too, should embrace this "culture" of evaluation. It is critical that this process be internally driven, without fear of reprisal or punishment for failure to achieve a standard that is continually evolving.

Standard Service Delivery Indicators as a Planning Tool

Prior to this study very little data was available in the area of supported employment for people with disabilities and the services that support them. Such information could be used as a planning tool at various levels — in government policy development, at a regional planning level, or at the level of each individual service provider.

At the government policy level, the information can assist policy makers when examining funding alternatives and/or levels. In the case of Ontario Disability Support Program-Employment Services (ODSP-ES), Ministry policy did not initially allow funding of supports beyond one year of service. After reviewing the data

provided by this study, this policy was amended to allow funding of support services for up to 10% of the individual's work time and the 12-month service limit was removed.

As an example of its use at the regional planning level, the data have shown that no person with physical, hearing, or visual disabilities accessed supported employment services in Area 2 (comprised of two specific counties). This may highlight an issue of access to services for these target groups in this particular area. Additionally, regional government should be concerned about the resource implications of consecutive increases in service utilization of 30% (1998-1999) and 32% (1999-2000).

Individual agencies can also use the data as an effective planning tool. When an agency can compare its individual data to the data for the county it operates in, and/or the region as a whole, it then has an analytical tool with which to review and evaluate its own performance relative to these benchmarks. The next logical step is to both develop and implement strategies to improve on weak areas and to capitalize on those elements that contributed to strong performance in other areas. A strategy session of this nature greatly contributes to continuous improvement within the agency as demonstrated by the following illustration.

Since first reporting on the data, a common discussion that has occurred with many service providers revolves around job sector representation. As previously noted, participation of persons with disabilities in the sales and services sector was at 52% compared to 24% for the general population. While acknowledging that there may be systemic reasons for this outcome, namely the typically lower educational levels of persons with disabilities and a lack of work experience for many in this group, this does not release the service provider from the responsibility of addressing the issue and improving the outcome. This generally demands a two-part discussion – what caused or causes this disparity and, what can be done to change or improve the outcome? Reflection of one service provider, having a 68% representation in the sales and services sector among its service recipients, yielded the following observations:

Never having had this type of data before, job developers were not aware that there was a problem with job sector representation or of the impact on those who work in the sector. As a result, they had never attempted to do anything differently.

Job developers naturally build on success (e.g., past success in securing jobs at McDonald's led to approaching Burger King, then A & W, Harvey's, etc…). In general, this is an easy sector in which to find jobs - jobs are plentiful and entry requirements are not rigorous.

Strategies to address this issue demanded more discussion and creativity, but included:

- Staff training in marketing and sales.
- Setting specific targets for jobs in different job sectors.
- Researching various job sectors to determine what companies operate in the area for each sector and what types of jobs are available within them.
- Dedicating a portion of staff resources to approaching larger companies and labour organizations (where job development generally takes more time and is more difficult).

Once these strategies are implemented, continued collection and analysis of the data (results) will indicate the degree of success, or improvement, in this area. This exercise can be repeated for each of the data elements (service indicators) that have been collected and benchmarked. Building a culture of evaluation and continuous quality improvement within an organization and the larger service delivery network (without fear or intimidation), is the ultimate result of what can be achieved through this process.

Endnote

[1] Labour statistics for the general population have been provided by Statistics Canada and are specific to the southwest region of Ontario.

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