

**WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS: TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT
STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS**

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Working Against Time

Unlike most populations, social assistance recipients experience multiple barriers to re-entering the workforce and face numerous challenges to meeting employers' needs for reliable workers (Brown, Ganzglass, Golonka, Hyland & Martin, 1998). In the transition to re-employment, many variables impede the process for assisting these individuals towards re-entry into the labour market. Variables such as low self-esteem, psychosocial issues and systemic discrimination (Friedman, 1999, Burman, 1988) represent a few of the challenges welfare recipients face. If these variables are not overcome, the likelihood of becoming re-employed is diminished. Caseworkers and employment counselors working with this population face many challenges. This paper will explore the notion of 'activity' and 'time' as they relate to working with a social assistance recipient population. The movement towards re-employment is affected by the length of time a participant is on social assistance (Hatala, 2003). The longer an individual is receiving assistance, the more difficult it becomes to leave welfare. Those individuals working with social assistance recipients must work quickly to administer the right intervention because the longer a person is on welfare the more difficult it becomes to move them off welfare.

Identifying training opportunities, participating in re-training and promoting a strong self-efficacy have also been identified as important variables in predicting re-employment for this population (e.g., Eden & Aviram, 1993, Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985, van Ryn & Vinokur, 1993). Dealing with these issues as quickly as possible after

job loss is critical to increasing the likelihood of becoming employed. Barriers to re-employment require interventions that are timely and address specific job related skills. If diversifying and expanding a social assistance recipient's social network increases the likelihood for finding work, then it is important that the individual is confident and has a solid plan of action. Therefore, building a participant's confidence to obtain employment can be accomplished through reinforcement of a strong self-efficacy.

Strategies to Working with Social Assistance Recipients

When dealing with the welfare population, many variables must be considered. These considerations were observed by Borgen and Amundson, (1987) as they described the stages of unemployment. The first stage is transitional in that an individual must accept their job loss or remain immobilized. Once an individual accepts job loss and realizes they need to acquire a new one, re-employment begins. If an individual is unsuccessful at this stage, a downward spiral becomes evident as the individual tries to cope with rejection and the stress associated with job search. When the individual has exhausted their ability to find employment, they start to feel worthless, isolated and drifting; at this time they may seek out guidance. Support, training or educational opportunities are introduced and the individual starts to feel hopeful, understood and encouraged and works towards re-employment. If retraining or re-education becomes the main focus for job re-entry, it is at this point in time that the individual must deal with any deterrents associated with returning to a training program.

Social assistance recipients have a high need when dealing with career related issues and are demographically highly varied. Rapid changes in technology and in

business economics mean that these would-be workers must upgrade their existing skills and acquire new ones throughout their working lives. As individuals seek career-related information they must be ready to receive it or they will be incapable of retaining relevant information (Robbins & Tucker, 1986). The need to examine these psychological issues more closely is imperative to moving these individuals towards re-employment. The longer these individuals are unemployed, the more difficult it becomes to deal with certain issues and move them towards employment (Forrester & Ward, 1991). What makes it even more difficult is that the social worker's caseload is typically large and there is limited time to work with clients to determine the appropriate intervention. If the client is deemed 'job-ready' they are usually referred to a community agency where employment-training is offered. If an inappropriate intervention is administered or the participant is not 'job ready', any attempt at providing re-employment related information is useless. The individual becomes further entrenched in the welfare system and it becomes that much more difficult for them to make the transition towards re-employment.

Social cognitive theories, such as Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) attempt to understand the dynamics of an individual's quest to identify a career direction. More specifically, the theory of self-efficacy can serve as a framework to assist this population. The importance of social assistance recipients feeling a sense of competence and being effective is key to making the transition to employment. Therefore, identifying the stage of a participant, as described by Borgen and Amundson (1987), can serve as a starting point for developing an action plan, dealing with self-esteem, confidence and career exploration.

Eden and Aviram (1993) identified a correlation between an individual who perceives self-efficacy to be the key to actually obtaining employment and represents a key indicator for expediting re-employment. Self-efficacy also determines the intensity of an individual's effort, as explained by Bandura (1989):

Those who have a high sense of efficacy visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides for performance and they cognitively rehearse good solutions to potential problems. Those who judge themselves as inefficacious are more inclined to visualize failure scenarios and to dwell on how things will go wrong. Such inefficacious thinking weakens motivation and undermines performance (p. 729).

If a social assistance recipient's efficacy is negative, promoting social network growth becomes a difficult task. The importance of improving a participant's self-efficacy is critical to expanding and diversifying their network. In order to increase contacts for potential employment opportunities, an individual must work from a positive frame of mind. If they are not able to remain positive and feel like they can contribute to society, the chance for recipients to grow their network is decreased. Those who work with this population must consider the social assistance recipient's state-of-mind in order to administer an appropriate intervention.

A study conducted by Kanfer and Hulin (1985) tested individuals for their perceived efficacy in carrying out different aspects of job search activities. A number of factors were identified that could contribute to successful employment including age, marital status, depression and perceived obstacles to re-employment. Among the factors identified, perceived efficacy was the only significant predictor of subsequent re-

employment. The higher the perceived efficacy, the more extensive job search behaviour and the higher the rate of re-employment (Kanfer & Hulin, 1985).

Employment-training offered by social assistance programs needs to integrate the notion of promoting strong self-efficacy into their curriculum. This will allow participants to evaluate their social network and implement coping strategies to deal with any issues that may affect their chances for employment. Monitoring and encouraging positive changes in 'self' will allow individuals to receive assistance with their job search, and process career related information more effectively (Robbins & Tucker, 1986).

The ability for social assistance recipients to regain the confidence to pursue employment involves many personal challenges. Unemployed individuals who have some sense of efficacy have a higher propensity for becoming re-employed (Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). The introduction of work-to-welfare programs needs to address the issues related to a participant's attempt to become re-employed by promoting the importance of social networks. Issues such as age, sex, family income and education play an important role in determining whether a social assistance recipient will become re-employed within a short period of time (Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). These types of issues can be classified as internal locus of control and the more a participant feels in control of these forces, the greater the likelihood for re-employment. External locus of control, such as job market pressures and economic conditions, are more difficult to deal with and may leave a sense of helplessness that is sometimes difficult to overcome. The creation of a 'plan of action' is one means for participants to create a bridge for the transition to re-employment. Being able to monitor a participant's plan of action

becomes critical. However, monitoring becomes difficult sometimes due to the large caseload of client's social workers and employment counselors have.

Referring a participant to employment-training can be devastating if the individual is not prepared to make the transition to re-employment. A study conducted in 1985 by Darkenwald and Valentine identified a deterrent construct that affected participation in re-training. One of the major findings in the study was that even though re-training represented a definite advantage to re-employment, the forces deterring individuals from seeking retraining are so great that they are unable to overcome them without some form of further intervention. For those identified as being out of work for a shorter period of time, it was found that these participants were at the stage of evaluating their present situation and basing their future actions on previous experiences (employer contacts, prior job search practices, updated resume, etc.). Their morale was positive and upbeat. Their immediate need was to develop a plan of action for their job search. Retraining or re-education represented an option but was not as important as finding immediate employment.

Individuals who had been unemployed for a longer period of time were less positive and were searching out different means for re-entering the workforce. Retraining and re-education became even more important options due to the deterioration of working skills as a result of being unemployed for a long period of time. Due to their inability to deal with personal issues, retraining does not represent a viable option at that time. The need to deal with those personal issues is critical prior to providing re-training that will bridge the gap to re-employment.

Prior negative educational experiences are major reasons for not effectively participating in employment-training (Eden & Aviram, 1993). A welfare-to-work program that discusses personal obstacles and barriers associated with prior educational experiences provides an opportunity for individuals to interact and discuss similar issues with others.

Designing Welfare-to-Work Programs

The need to address personal issues with social assistance recipients is crucial to their re-employment. Developing strategies that are in keeping with an individual's situation will increase the likelihood that they will make the transition to employment more efficiently. Increasing the perception of their sense of efficacy will promote the acquisition of job search skills, diversify their social network and ultimately increases job search activities (Eden & Aviram, 1993). Welfare-to-work programs should focus on building confidence by exploring self and its relation to the participant's current situation. Incorporating exercises that deal with self-concept, problem solving, network building and goal setting will assist participants in dealing with specific issues deterring them from re-employment.

Interventions that assist social assistance recipients in the transition to re-employment must be carefully planned and aligned with the needs of the participants. A supportive environment is a key factor for the transition to re-employment, allowing participants to share their experiences with others in similar circumstances (Borgen & Amundson, 1987). Conversely, diversifying and expanding their social network to include individuals who have different social, economical and psychological

circumstances will provide greater opportunities for making contacts. Creating an environment that promotes awareness and encourages self-discovery of specific issues that disrupt their perception of a strong efficacy is one way of dealing with these types of issues. Cognitive reframing is an approach that provides an alternative way of dealing with their present situation by allowing the individual to view their present situation in a different light (Borgen & Amundson, 1987). Reframing encourages individuals to view themselves much more positively and facilitates the process of building a better perception of their self-efficacy.

The overall goal of employment programs for social assistance recipients should address the notion of self-concept. The stronger the self-concept the greater likelihood of diversifying and expanding their social network. Many researchers have studied self-efficacy and its relation to re-employment and have concluded that the more positive an individual's efficacy the greater likelihood for re-employment (e.g., Eden & Aviam, 1993; Kanfer & Hulin, 1985). Employment counselors can facilitate the promotion of a strong self-efficacy by using approaches that stimulate self-discovery, such as group counseling, career exploration, social network mapping and reframing. Through interventions identified in this chapter, the transition to re-employment can be accomplished in an efficient manner. The stronger the perception of self-efficacy, the more activity generated, which increases the likelihood for re-employment. Increased or maintained activity can be coupled with the learned skills necessary to find work.

Maintaining an individual's job search activity is crucial to their re-employment. A strong self-efficacy, as identified in numerous studies highlighted in this chapter, increases the likelihood of re-entering the labour market. Employment-training for social

assistance recipients needs to deal with any psychosocial issues they may be experiencing before offering assistance for their job search. When working with this population, it is imperative that the issues of employment barriers and a weak self-efficacy be uncovered, otherwise any attempt of diversifying and expanding their social network will not work.

Welfare-to-Work Programs

Welfare-to-work programs across Canada have changed significantly over the last decade. Although they have continued to keep social assistance costs to a minimum and provide assistance only to those individuals who have exhausted every other means of support, the interpretation of the link between social assistance and employment varies greatly (Gorlick & Brethour, 1998). For example, in Ontario, the Ontario Works program has mandated that all able bodied social assistance recipients are required to participate in an employment stream. Which stream this is depends on the participant's situation and is based on employment history, length of time on assistance and career path. In the Atlantic Provinces, participation in similar programs is not required. The differences in approach of these programs reflect the labour market conditions in their respective areas.

A commonality among all provinces is that none of the social services departments deliver training directly. Through community agencies, employment-training programs, ranging from career exploration to job search clubs are delivered to social assistance recipients. Funding structures for community agencies vary across provinces, ranging from annual funding in Nova Scotia to performance-based funding in Ontario. Labour market conditions are considered in all of the provinces to determine the

design and implementation of programs that will increase the likelihood of participants becoming re-employed. New mandates have shifted from distributing benefits to developing ways for social assistance recipients to re-enter the labour market (Gorlick & Brethour, 1998). As a consequence of this new mandates, benefit delivery and employment services have been typically amalgamated into one department. The core focus for welfare departments is to move social assistance recipients from welfare to work.

The programs developed by social services have been designed to assist recipients in the transition towards re-employment. These programs facilitate the acquisition of employment skills that are required to compete in a competitive labour market. Program curricula may include career exploration, skill assessments, resume and cover letter writing, and job search skills. The goal is to reemploy participants as quickly as possible. The reason for the necessity of a quick transition is economical. Political mandates have called for the reduction of welfare cases and as a result program delivery has focused on “quick fix” training solutions that minimize government spending. For example, in Ontario, no common education or training programs have been developed specifically for Ontario Works, and to be eligible, training programs must be job-specific and lead to a quick return to employment (Gorlick & Brethour, 1998). Other provinces have adopted similar requirements to those of Ontario.

As a consequence of this approach by provincial governments, making the transition to re-employment becomes much more difficult for welfare recipients. As found in an evaluation conducted by Toronto Social Services for Ontario Works (2001), family and friend referrals were cited as the number one source for obtaining

employment (44%). It is recognized that social networks play a critical role in re-entry into the labour market. By allowing the types of training support that include only social assistant recipients, participants are unable to diversify and expand the individuals within their networks. These participants become further marginalized and are isolated from the rest of the population. In contrast, participating in programs that are mainstream can provide exposure to people with different social, economic, educational, and psychological circumstances, which will usually lead to expanding and diversifying their social network.

Welfare-to-work programs have generally been evaluated from an economic impact versus program delivery perspective. Cost analysis and savings have been assessed in the majority of the provinces in determining the return on investment. The provinces have adopted a 'business' approach in an attempt to move recipients off welfare caseloads. Through a combination of political pressure and fiscal responsibility, governments have made considerable strides in reducing the number of individuals who are on social assistance. For example, in 1997 at the beginning of welfare reform, there were 1,494,700 welfare cases nationally. In 1998 this number decreased by 7% to 1,401,600 welfare cases (CCSD, 1998).

Although the level of welfare participation has decreased across the provinces, an increase in poverty has occurred over the same period of time (Picot, Morissette & Myles, 2003). The implementation of program delivery evaluation has been limited and a true understanding of how community agencies are delivering employment interventions has yet to be conducted to any great degree. Ontario Works conducted a survey (2001) to determine what was happening to individuals after they left the program.

A random telephone survey was conducted of 3,335 people who had left social assistance. A response rate of 24% was achieved and 804 people were interviewed to gather further information. Fifty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they had left Ontario Works for employment-related reasons (e.g., beginning or returning to a job, getting a better job), 40% of those who left OW for employment had found work through a friend, relative or co-worker and 44% of respondents exited the caseload for non-employment related reasons (e.g., got another government benefit, started school). Although social networks were identified as the number one job referral source, statistics were not collected identifying how long these individuals were on assistance. Conversely, those participants who had limited or no social networks were not identified.

The importance of developing evaluation methods to determine program impact goes far beyond the number of people leaving welfare. What happens to individuals after they leave welfare is critical to understanding the nature of their transition to self-sufficiency. Recidivism as high as 20% has been documented for clients who leave programs and return in one year (Toronto Social Services, 2001). Feedback from surveys conducted by social service departments on welfare-to-work programs indicate that social networks play an important role in getting people re-employed. However, understanding the nature of social assistance recipients' networks requires further research in order to be able to assist in the expansion and diversification of their networks, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of their becoming re-employed.

Conclusion

Scholarly and professional research has demonstrated some promise for assisting social assistance recipients in the transition to re-employment. However, at least three gaps in our knowledge persist. First, intervention studies are limited with respect to measuring the diversification and expansion of the social networks for social assistance recipients. Second, published studies have not taken into account the length of time an individual is on social assistance and the strength of their social network, and third, studies have not examined the impact strengthened networks have on job acquisition.