

## THE ASSESSMENT COMPONENT OF EMPLOYMENT COUNSELLING: SOME SUGGESTIONS

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*Abstract*

Employment counselling services may be conceptualized as assessment followed by intervention to facilitate the movement of "not-job-ready" clients towards effective employment. Reported herein is a suggested approach to be used by employment counsellors within the assessment component of the sequence.

The assessment component of employment counselling is viewed (Patsula, 1980a) as an ongoing cyclical process in which emphasis is placed on (1) the collaborative (i.e., counsellor and client) identification of client employment/employability needs; (2) the translation of such needs into specific, measurable, and attainable counselling goals, and (3) the obtaining of client commitment to work on the counselling goals in order to enhance the possibility of obtaining effective employment.

It is contended that the assessment of client employment needs is a necessary initial step in the movement of the client towards effective employment and that such assessment is best conducted collaboratively by the counsellor and the client. The value of the counsellor-client collaboration, specificity of goals, and client commitment dimensions is that such dimensions ensure perceived and real movement of clients in their taking of responsibility for subsequent action plans (such interventions as counselling and training, for example). Movement towards assessment of client employability needs, and the actions required to meet these needs, is less apt to happen without client involvement.

Dynamically, the collaborative relationship invites the re-education of the client and counsellor *towards* a mutual respectfullness and the taking of responsibility in dealing with the resolution of the client's employment concern. That is, in a collaborative relationship clients are neither devolved of their responsibilities nor present themselves in self-deprecating manners because they have unmet employability needs; likewise employment counsellors are neither elevated nor present

themselves in a professionally overly detached manner because they happen to be *more congruent* (e.g., wish to have a job and *do have* a job) in an area in which the clients are *less congruent* (e.g., wish to have a job, but *do not* have a job). The clients are not pre-judged to be weak, lazy, unmotivated; the counsellors are not pre-judged to be infallible or omniscient.

Parenthetically the word "towards" is emphasized above as a reminder of the reality that not all clients (or, for that matter, not all counsellors) present themselves in the assessment counselling component, or develop during the assessment counselling component, the attitude of mutual respect and performance of shared responsibility posited as a goal of participants within such an encounter. The actual reaching of the above goal of mutuality of respect and effort with every client is not the critical issue. What is critical is that employment counsellors be open to such a relationship. Employment counsellors should foster client movement towards such a relationship and, at the same time, be fully aware that it may be too much to expect all clients to operate at high levels of collaboration.

It is seen, thus, that the collaborative nature of the assessment interview also invites the assessment counsellor to take the view not so much, "What can I do *for* this client", as the view, "What can I do *with* this client." The latter view ensures that changes the client perceives to be most necessary are seriously considered within the assessment process.

Likewise, clients of public employment agencies tend to be very much focused on the "here and now", (Patsula, 1978a, 1978b). Such clients find relief in taking, and clearly observing themselves as taking, concrete steps towards employment through the goal delineation task of the assessment interview.

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The contents of this paper are based on work done under contract with the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission. Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. P.J. Patsula, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5.

Commitment of the client to work on the mutually-derived counselling goals is imperative for the successful initiation of the subsequent intervention strategies.

The suggested framework to be used by the counsellor in helping the client to arrive at counselling goals and be willing to work on such goals based upon relevant client strengths and barriers is that of moving the client from the articulation of a *constraint statement* concerning a relevant employment issue or concern to the articulation of a *contingency statement*.

#### *Contingency Statements*

The assessment component of the counselling interview has been conceptualized (Patsula, 1980a) as an action-oriented start in the client's decision-making path to employment. That is, although it may be viewed as an ongoing counselling process, it is important to highlight it as an initial thrust in providing employment counselling service to "not-job-ready" clients. Intervention is posited to most productively follow adequate assessment (Bolles, 1979; Crystal & Bolles, 1974).

In the assessment component, the use of basic communication skills, (e.g., attending, paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, behavior description and feedback<sup>1</sup>) assists clients better to understand factors in their situation which are facilitating and constraining to their obtaining effective employment. Many clients are confused both with regard to their employment goals and the assumptions and values underlying any such goals. Such confusion is reflected in their inability to articulate clearly either their career goals or what they hope to achieve through their contact with employment counsellors. The generally helpful premise of the assessment counsellor is that confused thinking and confused speaking are both interactive and cumulative. To alleviate the client's confusion, the assessment counsellor sequentially may focus upon (1) the client's present means of articulating his/her goals for the counsellor-client interaction; (2) the client's present means of articulating his/her career goals; and (3) the client's present means of articulating the constraining and facilitating elements to effective employment.

A brief example follows of the counsellor's use of communicating skills in helping the client to clarify his/her barriers and strengths to employment.

Client: "*I can't go to job interviews because during job interviews I become too nervous*

1. The reader is referred to the work of John Wallen, the most complete bibliography of which may be obtained in the references of the recent article by Chinmaya & Vargo (1979). A sampling of other references include: Brammer, 1979; Carkhuff, 1973; Carkhuff et al., 1980; Egan, 1975a; 1975b; Gazda, 1977.

and anxious about doing well in the interview."

The above statement is a typical example of a *constraint statement* depicting confused thought and expression by the client. A *constraint statement* is a statement in which is indicated in absolute terms the impossibility, or limited likelihood, of obtaining a goal. Although the counsellor and client who have arrived at this expression of a concern have come a long way, nonetheless, much confusion still exists. The handicaps to clear thinking often include (1) confusing the improbable with the impossible; (2) the use of "sloppy" language; and (3) being overly general.

The task of the counsellor and client is to determine whether the expressed barrier is absolute or relative and to convert possibly "sloppy", misleading language to clearer, manageable language which allows more specific consideration of the barriers and strengths relating to the attainment of effective employment.

"Sloppy" language frequently results from (1) incorrect use of absolutes, for example, "all", "never", "can't", "none", "every", "only"; and (2) use of false assumptions.

Thus, the task of the counsellor and client regarding the above client's constraint statement is to clarify both thought and expression by reaching specific and useful definitions of the terms "can't", "nervous and anxious", "well", and the implied prediction that "nervous and anxious job interviewees do not get jobs". For instance, by the term "can't", does the client mean "won't", "unwilling", or "don't think that the bother is worth it". By "nervous and anxious", does the client mean "sweating palms", "trouble speaking clearly and fluently", and/or "distracted from hearing the interviewer's questions"? The term "well" could mean anything from "obtaining a job offer prior to the close of every job interview to "not having the interview prematurely terminated".

With the help of the clarifying responses of the counsellor, the client's constraining statement concerning job interviews may be worded more clearly and in a more workable fashion in the form of a *contingency statement* as follows:

*"If I am to keep the interview going, then I will have to deal with such things as sweaty palms, speaking clearly and fluently, and hearing the interviewer's questions."*

During the assessment component of the counselling interview, the counsellor's clarifying responses are aimed at *helping the client to change constraint statements* (e.g., "I can't change because of . . .") into *contingency statements* (e.g., "If I wish to change, then I will have to deal with . . ."). The contingency statement indicates in specific behavioural terms what must be done

about the barrier in order to move towards effective employment. To state the above in a format adapted from that of Loughary and Ripley (1976), the following 7-step procedure is advanced:

1. Provide a relationship of mutual trust and respect.
2. Elicit from clients a statement of an employment issue or concern.
3. Help clients to analyze and clarify the concern in order that they can state the concern in the form of a *constraint statement*, (i.e., "I cannot do A because of B").
4. Help clients to identify and state the *underlying value(s) or assumption(s)* within the constraint statement.
5. Help clients to analyze and *clarify* the underlying value(s) or assumption(s) and to judge such values and assumption as constructive or as self-defeating.
6. If, after clarification, the underlying assumption is judged to be self-defeating, help the client to formulate a more productive assumption.
7. Help clients to formulate a *contingency statement* using the form "If I am to do A, then I must \_\_\_\_\_".

Familiarity with the work of Albert Ellis (Dryden, 1979; Ellis, 1973; Ellis & Harper, 1975) in the identification and the disputing of irrational beliefs would aid employment counsellors in the identification and clarification of underlying value(s) within the constraint statements of clients. Likewise, a working knowledge of typical employee-client strengths and barriers relating to employment/employability (Patsula, 1978c), as well as knowledge of human dynamics related to the change process (Capelle, 1979), motivation (Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1970), decision making (Horan, 1979; Janis & Mann, 1977), to give but a few examples of desired counsellor competencies, would be beneficial, if not essential, for counsellor effectiveness.

The reader may wish to practice formulating possible contingency statements from the client constraint statements listed below. The exercise of formulating contingency statements may best be conducted by following a systematic format. Thus, for each of the constraint statements provided, you may wish to write (a) the possible terms to be clarified within the constraint statement; (b) a possible underlying assumption or value indicated; (c) the terms to be explored or clarified within the underlying assumption or value; (d) a judgement that the underlying assumption or value is either constructive or self-defeating; (e) a constructive alternate assumption or value, and (f) a contingency statement based on the new assumption or value.

### *Example*

#### *Constraint Statement:*

*I can't go to work as a waitress because my family would never allow it.*

- (a) Terms to be clarified: "waitress" ("or any other job, e.g., president of the company"?); "family" ("spouse or children or both"?); "allow" ("be annoyed? angry? inconvenienced"?); "never" ("even if they understood your need, be it financial or psychological?").
- (b) Underlying assumption:  
*My role as mother and wife demands that I always put the needs of others before my own needs.*
- (c) Terms to be clarified: "role"; "always"
- (d) Underlying assumption/value is:  
Constructive  Self-Defeating  Check One  
If constructive, STOP  
If self-defeating, CONTINUE  
(In this example, let us assume that the counsellor and client agree that the underlying assumption is self-defeating.)
- (e) Constructive alternative assumption/value:  
*Both my needs and the needs of others are important considerations.*

- (f) Contingency statement:

*If I am to go to work outside the home, it would be useful to clearly understand and to communicate my needs and decide on a job that is suitable to me and which takes into consideration the needs of other members of the family.*

Constraint statements on which to practice developing contingency statements could be:

*Constraint Statement:* I cannot quit my job as a carpenter's helper and take upgrading course at the community college because my friends would think that I was being snobbish.

*Constraint Statement:* I cannot get a job because I don't have any work skills.

*Constraint Statement:* I can't find any work because there are no jobs available.

*Constraint Statement:* I can't . . . (complete a constraint statement that you have recently encountered from a client).

There are many advantages to the use of client contingency statements rather than client constraint statements. Four such advantages are that contingency statements shift (1) the focus of the client from paralyzing absolutes to the consideration of alternatives (e.g., "I can't" to "What can I do?", [Janis and Mann, 1977; Glasser, 1965; Bassin et al, 1976]); (2) the client's attitude from one of pessimism to one of optimism (eg., away from the pessimistic "I can't do A", in which the logical conclusion is that "If you can't, then I

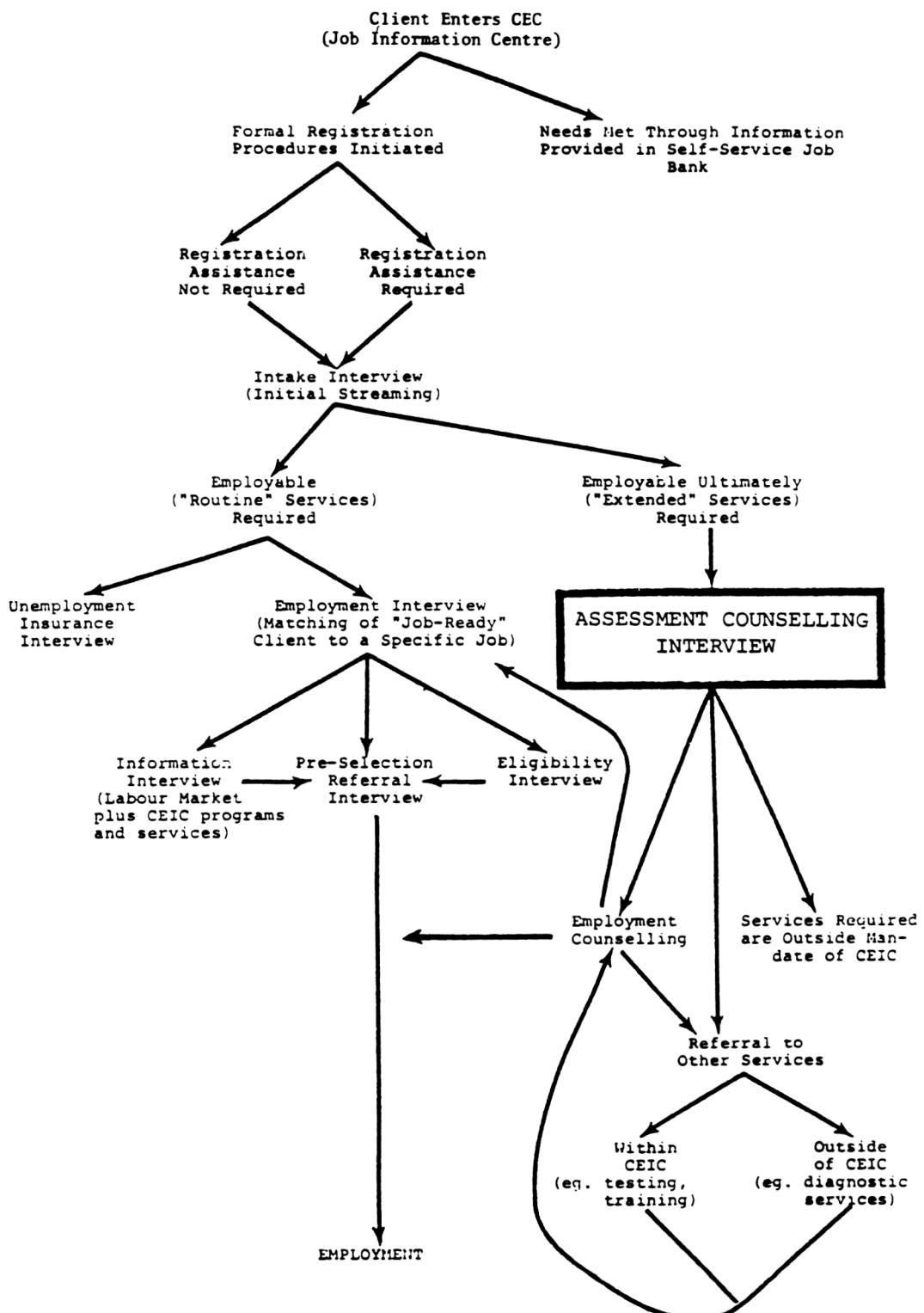


Figure 1.  
Conceptual sequencing of CEC employee-clients.

guess you can't", to the more optimistic "If I am to do A, then I . . ."), (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976); (3) the client's view of his/her control of events from external control to *internal control* (Lefcourt, 1976; 1972; Rotter, 1975, 1966); and (4) the client's behavior from passive recipient to potentially *active participant*, (Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1970).

In addition to the above noted advantages the process of formulating contingency statements from constraint statements leads to the clarification of underlying values/assumptions of the client. Such clarification helps the client to develop a greater self-understanding which contributes to clearer and more realistic statements of strengths regarding employment.

Specific counsellor knowledge, skill, and attitude dimensions required to help clients in developing contingency statements regarding their employability concerns may be delineated and taught (Patsula, 1980a, 1980b). In such a program, helping clients formulate relevant contingency statements is regarded as the "pièce de résistance" of the assessment process.

The translation of the contingency statement into a specific counselling goal is a simple matter, since the contingency statement already is formulated in specific behavioural terms. Likewise, the obtaining of commitment of the client to work on the counselling goal is enhanced by the active involvement of the client throughout the process of contingency statement formulation and counselling goal delineation.

#### *Application to Canada Employment Centres*

Provided in Figure 1 is the authors' observation of present general practice in many Canada Employment Centres with added emphasis upon the suggested assessment component, termed the "assessment counselling interview", as a preliminary focus prior to client referral, termination or employment counselling intervention.

The use of the terms "Routine" and "Extended" in referring to Services provided in Figure 1 does not denote that the former service is of lesser importance than the latter service. The task of CEC personnel is seen to be that of assisting individuals in their bid in preparing for, attaining, maintaining, and progressing in effective employment. "Routine" services are provided through employment interviewing with emphasis upon the matching of client to a job; whereas, "Extended" services are provided through employment counselling with emphasis upon the development of the client's employment goal, which includes opportunity to deal with hindrances to the achievement of the client's employment goal.

#### *Conclusion*

The formulation of contingency statements in assessing client employment/employability needs, and in delineating counselling goals can be a valuable aid to the employment counsellor in providing effective and efficient service to "not-job-ready" employee-clients. The specific counsellor knowledge, skill, and attitude dimensions required to facilitate the mutual development of contingency statements have been conceptually defined (Patsula, 1980a) and trainers' workshop materials have been developed (Patsula, 1980b). A future report will be directed to the results of validation studies conducted on the materials.

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