

Developing an Accountability Framework for Career Development Practices

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Background

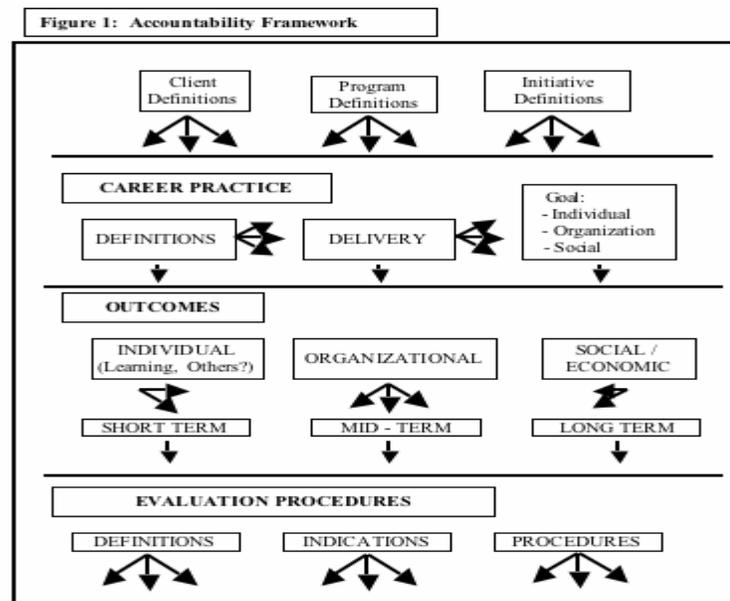
The Alberta Symposiums on career development and public policy held in 2002 and 2003 affirmed that the evaluation of career development practices is important for all stakeholders. The Alberta Symposiums consisted of a series of forums and working group meetings that included career practitioners, policy makers, and representatives from the private sector. One of the working groups focused on the topics of research and evaluation. During these consultations, a need was identified for creating shared understandings of evaluation procedures and the desired outcomes for career development practices. Of importance, is the development of career practitioner competencies regarding evaluation procedures. Policy makers also indicated the need to consider a wider range of indicators of effective career development practices and programs. The purpose of effective evaluation of career development services is to provide useful, concrete feedback to program managers, practitioners, policy makers and other interested parties. Stakeholders agreed that career practice is informed by evaluation, but it could be better informed. Improved evaluation procedures also allow service providers to meet the increasing demands from program funding organizations for accountability.

The working group on research and evaluation confirmed the importance of measuring outcomes from a variety of stakeholder perspectives using quantitative and qualitative methods. The group also recognized a primary need for the identification of predictable relationships between interventions and outcomes, requiring an ability to compare interventions across evaluation studies. Three priorities were identified (a) a communications strategy for all stakeholders; (b) the clarification of desirable or acceptable outcomes for career development practices, and (c) the development of a system for archiving and easily obtaining information about career intervention evaluation research. The development of an accountability framework or taxonomy is an activity that was considered as a step towards improved evaluation and accountability. The development of improved processes for the evaluation of career development practices has been identified as a priority nationally and internationally (Plant 2001; Maguire and Killeen 2003; Mayston 2002), resulting in a number of activities contributing to the development of a comprehensive evaluation framework for career development services.

An Accountability framework for career development practices

An accountability framework (Figure1) is proposed as a basis by which to elaborate a comprehensive framework of evaluation for career development services (Huston and Lalande 2004). This model considers 4 categories relevant to evaluation and is based primarily on the work done by Plant (2001) and Maguire and Killeen (2003):

1. The focus of the evaluation (clients, programs, larger initiatives, such public education regarding career development).
2. Types of career practices (interventions; strategies, methods of delivery; focus of intervention as either individual, organizational, or societal).
3. Criteria, outcomes or outputs (individual, organizational, social/economic).
4. Evaluation procedures (types of evaluation, indications for evaluation, and procedures).



The first category consists of the individual, program or larger career development initiative that receives the service(s) and hopefully, experiences some type of change as a result of the service(s). Each subcategory of individual, program or larger initiative needs to be defined. Types of individuals can be defined by socio-demographic data, goals, etc. Types of programs can be defined by client composition, desired outcomes, etc. Types of career development initiatives can be defined by the target populations, specified desired outcomes, etc.

The second category refers to the complex variety of career development services that are available. These are largely defined by the *Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners* (2001) and include definitions of career counselling, career assessment, provision of labour market information, work development and community capacity building to only mention a few. This document seems to be relevant for individual and program evaluation, however, definitions related to larger career development initiatives may not be adequately covered in this document. The variety of career development services can be described according to the method of delivery and a means of assessing the extent to which the delivery of the intervention is consistent with the intended use of the intervention. This refers to “process-based” evaluation (McNamara 1998), considering how the career development practices are delivered. In this category, the specific goals are defined for the career services delivered. The elaboration of goals in this category highlights the importance of the development stage of a treatment plan in the development of evaluation procedures. Assessment procedures such as a needs assessment, career development inventories, etc. can be provided as tools utilized to identify goals along with the specification of measurable outcomes. This goal specification provides direction for the next category in which evaluation outcomes are defined

The third category encompasses a variety of outcomes or outputs that occur on a continuum from short term to long term outcomes. This category includes a variety of desired results of career development services. Examples of the types of individual outputs include increased knowledge, skills, or behaviour changes regarding their careers. Criteria relevant to the individual client include learning outcomes. *The Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* provides a framework of learning outcomes that could be utilized to identify criteria related to learning outcomes. Other criteria for organizations can be identified as deemed relevant to other stakeholders such as the program funders, or the community (Obrecht 1999). The benefits for society that are attributed to career development services have been outlined by Mayston (2002) and provide an initial starting point for defining possible societal outcomes.

The final category includes the variety of evaluation procedures that are available to assess the quality and effect of career development services. A taxonomy of evaluation terminology needs to be included that provides a list of terms used in evaluation and accountability along with the definitions. The document from OECD titled *A Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management* (2002) provides a starting point for this part of the framework. Specification of evaluation methods can be provided that includes the linking of specific measures for particular outcomes and/or interventions. Options for measurement tools such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, etc. will be provided along with the appropriate use for these tools according to the type of client, program or initiative; the activities to be checked; the question to be evaluated; the resources available; and the outcomes to be measured.

Each evaluation procedure also can be described in terms of a method for application and for the analysis of the results. Procedures can be identified that increase the reliability and validity of the evaluation results. In all types of evaluation studies, it is important to determine if the treatment caused the actual outcome (the principle of causal inference). Causal inference is possible when (a) the treatment (cause) precedes the outcome or change; (b) the cause and effect covary; and (c) it is possible to eliminate other possible causes for the outcome or change (Vingilis and Pederson 2001).

It is important to note that input-output models such as the accountability framework are not suitable for evaluation of services for all client populations, particularly when considering cost effectiveness (Plant 2001). Clients from diverse backgrounds, who are disadvantaged or have multiple issues, may not show direct benefit from receipt of one generic career development service. Specialized programming or long-term participation in many services may be more appropriate for these clients. Evaluation measures for diverse client populations may need to demonstrate the extent to which the career development strategy or intervention aligns with relevant research and theory (a quality measure). Longitudinal evaluation procedures may also be indicated for these populations.

In order to elaborate a comprehensive framework of career services evaluation procedures, it would be useful to initially choose one area of the framework to develop in greater detail. This would provide guidelines for accountability for one area of career development practice that could be implemented before considering other parts of the framework. The purpose of the project would be to develop an evaluation framework that would identify particular effective evaluation procedures suitable for specific clients and career practices. Consideration would be given to the relevance of diversity to effective evaluation, various stakeholder needs, and how to make the evaluation procedures available to practitioners. The framework can be utilized to develop a set of evaluation competencies required for practitioners to allow them to integrate effective evaluation into the program design and delivery.

A Starting Point

This proposed accountability framework for career development practices represents a preliminary conceptualization of how the variety of factors related to evaluation and accountability can be systematically construed. The topics of accountability and evaluation in relation to the large field of career development practice are complex and multifaceted. One could argue that it is impossible to represent this in one framework and the value of this approach is limited, however, levels of complexity can be added to various categories as indicated. Hopefully, this preliminary framework will provide a starting point for future conversations to further elaborate and develop meaningful processes for the evaluation of career development practices.

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