

Quality Career Counselling Services: A Developmental Tool for Organizational Accountability

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Abstract

There is growing attention to issues concerning quality services in career counselling. At the same time, very few practical working tools are available to help organizations build quality of service principles, practices and policies into all levels of their organizations. Even fewer do so with attention to the importance of staff development as well as quality control as central to quality service. A workbook supporting both objectives has been developed and tested. Its several components are described and a more detailed discussion of an accountability framework is included. The development of additional practical resources to support increased evaluation in career counselling is suggested.

Résumé

Une attention de plus en plus grande porte sur les problèmes concernant la qualité des services en counseling de carrière. Par contre, il y a très peu d'outils de travail disponibles pour aider les organismes à développer des principes de service de qualité, des pratiques et des politiques à tous les niveaux de leurs organisations. De plus, plusieurs mettent très peu d'emphase sur l'importance du développement professionnel de leurs employés aussi bien que le contrôle de la qualité comme étant un élément central de la qualité de service. Un manuel a été développé et testé pour appuyer ces deux objectifs. Ces différentes composantes sont décrites et une discussion détaillée sur la pertinence du cadre de référence est incluse. Le développement de ressources additionnelles pratiques pour appuyer l'importance de l'évaluation en counseling de carrière est suggéré.

Concern over issues pertaining to quality assurance of service delivery in career counselling has increased over recent years. The general public is becoming more informed about what to expect from career counselling service providers and, as a consequence, more critical. Service needs in career-related areas are becoming broader and more acute as employment pressures grow and persons need to manage ongoing career changes. With resources becoming scarcer, funders are becoming more insistent about accountability and quality assurance. Further, the absence of visible standards contributes to career counselling being relatively poorly understood and undervalued both inside and outside the counselling profession itself.

As a result, agencies providing career counselling services need mechanisms for determining how best to deploy the resources they have and to ensure that they are indeed providing quality service. To date, few tools exist that could aid organizations in examining quality service delivery issues. This article reviews a practical tool developed to guide people

through a process to address quality assurance and evaluation procedures in organizations. Unlike previous attempts to address quality assurance, the tool outlined is not prescriptive. Rather, it outlines generic and adaptable procedures for organizations to follow.

Recognizing the need for such practical tools and an applied approach, the National Advisory Committee¹ of the Creation And Mobilization of Counselling Resources for Youth (CAMCRY) project, a major research and development program of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation (CGCF), acted to address the issue.

Consideration was given to several ways of responding to the need. One method that was considered was developing a set of model policies and standards which could be offered to jurisdictions for their consideration and possible adoption. However, because jurisdictions which provide career counselling vary so much in their mandates, it became clear that no single set of service standards or policies could be recommended. Each jurisdiction would need to articulate what was essential and achievable for them.

From these deliberations emerged the idea of creating a developmental procedure for organizations and/or individuals to "do it themselves." The vision was to develop a tool that would be sufficiently generic to be useful in many jurisdictions and at the same time sufficiently specific that it would provide a structure for examining standards and quality of service for a range of career counselling services. Such an approach was attractive for several reasons. First, the procedures recommended are developmental in nature and concentrate on supporting organizational and staff growth and development. Second, quality of service is determined at all levels of the organization and not "up there," where policy is often seen to reside. The process recommended would be inclusive of staff at all levels. The spirit was to use policies and standards for quality control but principally as developmental tools which support self-initiated processes for quality development and change. The result was to produce a workbook which would assist organizations to examine their quality and service parameters and take corrective action where necessary. This workbook is entitled *Quality Career Counselling Services: A Policy Workbook* (Riddle & Bezanson, 1994).

The workbook that emerged addresses two levels of objectives. The *short-term* objective of the workbook is to provide a working tool to support organizations in reviewing and strengthening their practices in career counselling. The *longer term* objective is to achieve a cumulative improvement in standards of career counselling in all jurisdictions where such services are offered. The workbook content has been field-tested in several jurisdictions, e.g., education, guidance, professional association,

¹ The Advisory Committee was composed of representatives of 14 associations, several provincial ministries of education and career development, and HRD.

board of directors, rehabilitation, social services, and YMCA. Ten agencies participated in the field test process. Without exception, all reported that the workbook assisted them in looking at quality of services, identifying areas in need of attention, and drawing attention to areas that already were solid. Thus, the workbook addresses the short term objectives. The field test also served to provide formative feedback on content.

This paper describes the structure of the workbook and the process followed in addressing quality of service. The paper also illustrates the usefulness of the workbook's structure by describing the approaches used to measure accountability.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORKBOOK

The approach taken in the workbook is illustrated in Figure 1. Quality of service in career counselling is seen as a composite of what is experienced by the clients who receive career counselling services, and what is experienced by the staff in terms of their own career development.



Figure 1

The workbook is designed in two parts, with Part 1 addressing *policy development* and Part 2 addressing *staff development*. Each part begins with a self-assessment that is then linked to subsequent material that the agency can use to address issues selected. If the self-assessment indicates improvements could be made and/or the area has not yet been developed,

a guided discussion section is included with a suggested procedure for decisions, and defining outcome statements, and defining plans of action. After the self-assessment of career counselling policies in Part 1 of the workbook, there is a series of guided discussions in eight areas considered critical to quality of service:

1. Organizational mandate.
2. Statement(s) of service offered.
3. Statement(s) of service standards.
4. Mechanism for ensuring well-informed clients.
5. Statement(s) of provider competence.
6. Statement(s) of professional behaviour.
7. Management practices review.
8. Accountability statement and mechanisms.

The workbook guides the user through the development of appropriate policies in any of the eight areas chosen for work by the agency, as well as action plans for implementing the policies. If organizations already have developed each component and they are in place, the discussions can still serve as confirmation.

Part 1 of the workbook focuses on *external* delivery of services and the effectiveness of these services for the recipients. An assumption in Part 1 is that clients evaluate the services they receive on the basis of how satisfied they are with how they are received and treated, the degree to which their expectations for service are met, the extent to which they can count on the services over time and the results they achieve for themselves. Organizations which have in place policies and standards in each of the eight areas covered in Part 1 have a foundation which supports clients experiencing these conditions and evaluating services positively.

Part 2 of the workbook also begins with a self-assessment, this time of human resource planning practices. Part 2 focuses on career/staff development and planning at all levels of the organization, given that staff skills are the basis for quality service provision. In any area of staff development where agencies want assistance in improving, the workbook provides action guidelines resulting from responses to the following types of critical questions: (a) do staff at all levels (support, counsellor, supervisor, manager) have the skills and resources to be able to deliver services to clients at the standards established as a result of the eight discussions and action plans emerging from Part 1; and (b) do staff at all levels have attention paid to their own career development, particularly a plan of action to acquire skills for their next step? Each activity leads to a staff development plan including a procedure for identifying and organizing appropriate supervision in order to put the development plans into practice.

Parts 1 and 2 are connected in two important ways. First, conceptually and philosophically, the procedures and processes outlined promote a respect for the career development of all players in an organization which supports and delivers such services to clients. Second, operationally the user emerges from Part 1 with a series of policy statements and standards of practice, and then Part 2 results in achievable action plans to equip staff to deliver service to the standards which Part 1 has defined. The developmental process for organizational growth is intended to be repeated as a regular part of the planning cycle. Organizations are encouraged to build gradually, systematically and in ways which are measurable and achievable towards quality service.

AN ILLUSTRATION: THE ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

The Accountability Framework is the last of the eight areas in Part 1 of the workbook, and has been selected to provide an illustration of the workbook process. Being accountable for the consequences of career counselling is an important part of ensuring quality service. Accountability must be linked to explicit performance measures and provide input to the annual planning process.

There are three pieces to the accountability framework: (a) the creation of an Accountability Policy Statement; (b) the availability and visibility of materials which demonstrate the policy in action; and (c) a suggested framework for feedback mechanisms making use of sources at all levels of the organization. Each of these pieces is briefly described below.

Accountability Statement

The workbook suggests that it is important to develop a clearly articulated statement about how an organization defines its commitment to accountability. Having an explicit and visible policy statement focusses attention on the degree to which accountability is central to the agency providing service. The accountability statement should contain three fundamental elements: (a) accountable for what; (b) measured how; and (c) measured how often. An example of a generic model accountability statement might be, "We accept accountability for the quality of career counselling services delivered and evaluate these services regularly against measurable performance criteria at least once a year."

As a first step, users of the workbook are asked about whether or not they have such an accountability statement and, if so, how accurate and adequate they feel it is. If they wish to develop an accountability statement, or modify the one they have, they are referred to Discussion #8 on Accountability. They are then encouraged to use the guided discussion in the workbook to develop an accountability statement which fits their organizations if they do not already have one, modify their existing

statement to make it more complete, or adopt the generic statement given as it is.

Availability and Visibility of Materials

Earlier in Part 1 of the workbook, other discussions would have produced policy statements in several areas relevant to demonstrating accountability, including:

1. Performance measures for service delivery (Discussion #3).
2. Standards of professional conduct (Discussion #6).
3. Statements of management practice (Discussion #7).

Therefore, the output of Discussion #3 will have specified what the measures are against which services are to be evaluated. These measures should then become available for public review and be visible as standards to be expected by clients and service deliverers alike. The same is true for standards of professional conduct which would have been articulated in Discussion #6. The standards of professional conduct also should be a visible demonstration of a key ingredient in quality service, as well as being another delivery performance criterion. Similarly for the output of Discussion #7.

In referring to previous sections in the workbook, the principle is to make certain that accountability materials exist, that they reflect accurately the organization's standards and are as understandable and transparent as possible.

Feedback Mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms are the intelligence-gathering tools which an organization has in place to inform it of the degree to which quality service is being experienced by the client. Data from these feedback tools should guide changes and enhancements in how services are delivered. The workbook suggests obtaining feedback in three key areas: (a) client perception of service quality; (b) professional competence; and (c) managerial efficiency.

Perceived service quality. Quality of service is directly linked to how satisfied the client is with the service received. If the self-assessment indicates that client feedback on quality of service is not being solicited, a framework to guide the development of an appropriate feedback tool is suggested. The framework lists six factors that have a bearing on client evaluations of service received: reliable provider performance, consistent provider performance, timeliness of service provision, the degree of respect displayed for clients, the degree to which the expected outcomes are achieved, and the presence or absence of back-up systems to ensure ongoing service provision.

Further, client satisfaction is directly linked to how good the match is between what clients expect to receive by way of service and what they actually experience. Therefore, managing client expectations is important. Client expectations depend significantly on the extent to which they have access to accurate information on services that the organization can deliver. One of the most common sources of client dissatisfaction stems from unrealistic expectations. Realistic expectations are a result of, at least in part, accessible and visible information about the services provided and not provided, alternate service sources, types of clients serviced, and extent of service which can be reasonably expected. The workbook suggests that an appropriate accountability mechanism for client feedback on quality of services should provide at least for input into the areas outlined above. Doing so will assist an agency in moving beyond the more common and general "satisfaction" rating which is often as much as clients are asked to provide.

Another key to ensuring quality service is to specify explicit behavioural standards to be met by staff and then make sure that staff have the resources to meet those standards. A principle which is encouraged in the workbook is to set standards which can be met with reasonable certainty and then aim to exceed that standard. From the perspective of client satisfaction, it is preferable to always demonstrate consistency and sometimes to exceed expectations than to set standards so high that they are rarely attained.

A sample treatment of service standards for career counselling is given in Figure 2. It will not fit exactly the delivery realities of many organizations, but it provides a structure for formulating statements which do fit. Once completed, these statements become the criteria against which both clients and staff assess the degree to which service standards are being met. The statement in Figure 2 suggests content for a client feedback instrument on service standards if one does not already exist. It is suggested that these standards (perhaps in more user-friendly format) be accessible and visible to clients and service providers.

Professional competence and managerial efficiency. In both of these areas, the use of peer review is recommended at all levels of the organization. This means that a peer review process is used for support staff to examine service delivery, and their assessments are used in the planning process and subsequently in the supervisory process. A similar peer procedure is used for counsellors, and so on throughout the organization. The use of peer review is generally acknowledged as an important source of feedback, but it is one which is seldom actually used. The counselling profession is one in which communication and feedback skills can be expected to be strong. Therefore, the use of peer feedback could be expected to be relatively easily incorporated into service practice.

- A. *Fill in the days of the week that your office is open or your phone is answered.*
- B. *Fill in the type of person from whom clients can expect to receive initial assistance.*
- C. *Fill in who is expected to provide coordination among services: the client? the provider? an external party?*
- D. *Fill in the method that you use for back-up (e.g., for providing phone coverage when someone is away from their desk).*
- E. *Fill in the other specifics for the other blanks with regard to service standards.*

Clients can receive information on service available and arrange to receive services by *phone/walk-in* between ____ a.m. and ____ p.m. on ____ A _____. When clients walk in, they can expect to be helped within ____ minutes by ____ B _____. When clients phone in, the phone is always answered by the ____ ring. Clients can expect to wait no longer than ____ days to receive services or begin a program/course. When clients arrive for scheduled appointments, they can expect the intervention to begin within ____ minutes of the scheduled time. When career counselling services are delivered over several sessions, our clients can usually expect to see the same provider each time. When several different types of career counselling services are to be delivered, the coordination of those different services is typically provided by ____ C _____. so that the client receives an integrated service. In order to ensure quality service delivery, we expect all staff to adhere to our "Service Quality Standards," and we ensure that no provider has a caseload of more than _____. We ensure continuous availability of service during our office hours by ____ D _____.

Figure 2

The workbook does not actually provide recommended client feedback tools for organizations to use. This could be another important resource to develop. Similarly it does not provide tools to structure the peer review procedure, other than the discussion frameworks themselves. However, these are well suited to be completed by peer groups and will quite naturally result in feedback on service quality and management practices.

Supervision, like peer review, can be a source for ongoing staff development and support, but it also tends to be underutilized. The skills which are prevalent in career counselling are skills which support the use

of supervision as a staff development process rather than the more common practice of once a year performance appraisals.

The underuse of supervision for development purposes was recently underscored in the Canadian Labour Force Development Board survey, *Career and Employment Counselling in Canada* (Conger, Hiebert & Hong-Farrell, 1993). Counsellors in the survey reported that they received supervision on their work with clients rarely, although they did report receiving performance appraisals regularly. Supervisors/managers on the other hand reported providing supervision to their counsellors regularly. This suggests that supervisors may perceive performance review as a form of supervision, while practitioners make a distinction between appraisals (which evaluate) and supervision (which is developmental and intended to assist them in their professional development).

The workbook does not try to be a workbook on supervision, but it does introduce a relatively broad perspective on ways to organize opportunities for developmental supervision. As resources and budgets for formal training become more scarce, the motivation and need to maximize readily available sources of ongoing staff development become more urgent. The framework for supervision proposed in the workbook is given in Figure 3. This approach is based on self-assessment by the staff

Type of supervision	Present frequency:			Desired frequency:		
	At least once a month	Once a year	Ongoing	Just the same	More often	Less often
Self-assessment						
Supervisor review of:						
Relations with clients	—	—	—	—	—	—
Relations with staff	—	—	—	—	—	—
Administrative work	—	—	—	—	—	—
Peer review						
Review by external experts						
Staff meetings						
Coaching						
Performance appraisal						
Other:						

Figure 3
Types of Supervision Received and Desired

person, and subsequently an articulation of the type of supervisor preferred. The completed list becomes a basis for action, for directing the type of supervision desired, and also for seeking out sources of supportive supervision.

Summary of the Accountability Framework

The accountability/feedback mechanisms suggested by the workbook include two distinct types of client input, peer review of services and standards at all levels of the organization, peer review of management practices, and a feedback loop into a developmental supervisory process which leads to action planning. Upon completion of the section on Accountability, users of the workbook have four outcomes: (a) a statement of accountability; (b) a range of materials which are visible to demonstrate accountability; (c) a series of feedback tools to get information on service quality from clients, counsellors and managers; and (d) a plan of action in one or more areas needing attention. Each outcome contributes to a higher standard of service quality. Other sections of the workbook follow a similar type of assessment and discussion procedure leading to specific outcomes in each of the eight areas addressed in the workbook.

CONCLUSION

The *Quality Career Counselling Services: A Policy Workbook* (Riddle & Bezanson, 1994) described in this paper was developed as a practical tool to support a broad range of jurisdiction in examining standards in career counselling services. This paper has provided a perspective on the process taken in the workbook by describing the section dealing with accountability mechanisms which are a critical area for standards, policies and tools. Taken as a whole, the workbook is a self-instructional resource to support quality of service. The workbook provides a framework for understanding critical factors in service quality and by suggesting a shift from "service provision" to "meeting client expectations." It also strongly advocates a concentration on client and service outcomes.

Most groups who have used the workbook, or have attended presentations on it, have become enthusiastic about its application within their organizations. It appears to be meeting a void in the types of resources available which provide actual support to organizations who want to better meet increased demands for greater accountability and measurable results.

It may be timely to examine the need for the development of a number of practical resources which support organizations in a range of areas related to evaluation. It is interesting to note that the recent national survey (Conger, Hiebert & Hong-Farrell, 1993) indicated that very few respondents actually do any ongoing evaluation of the programs they

deliver to clients. This may well reflect a resource need within many career counselling organizations. A workbook/guide similar to the one described here, which educates and institutes a developmental "how to" process for program review, could be very well received and used to make a quality impact on program standards. Similarly, a workbook/compendium which could be a resource for the development of actual feedback tools and outcome measures might be very well received.

A spinoff with considerable potential could be a concerted effort to identify and develop and test a range of materials to support organizations who want to access and implement a more comprehensive evaluation framework in career counselling.

References

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Readers wishing a copy of the workbook can order it from the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, 202-411 Roosevelt Avenue, Ottawa, Canada K2A 3X9.

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