

Labor Market Analysis Series: Informed Choice and Cultural Considerations - Module 3

CHRISTINE JOHNSON: Hello, welcome to LMI in the VR process, module 3, informed choice and cultural considerations. I'm Christine Johnson with the George Washington University Center for Innovative Training, and I'll be your presenter today. This slide is an acknowledgment and a disclaimer from our federal partners about this presentation.

This is part 3 of a four part series. Putting the pieces together and using labor market information and the importance of that in the VR process. Our learning objectives for module 3 are to increase knowledge and skills by utilizing informed choice concepts for job seekers with disabilities that improve outcomes for competitive integrated employment and by promoting inclusion and equity when exploring careers and career pathways with your job seekers with disabilities.

I'd like to take a moment and point out to you that I will be using the term job seeker throughout this presentation. I'm a firm believer that words matter, and I've always found that using the term job seeker helps to change the perception in the mind of the client or consumer that we work with and also for the counselor. So again, we're not doing vocational rehabilitation to someone, but we're doing it with them. So I find that using the term job seeker is just a much more empowering and positive term.

Labor market information. An informed choice really has a basis in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended. It makes it very clear in the act in its policy statement that all programs, projects, and activities funded under the act must be carried out in a manner consistent with the principles and respect for individual dignity, personal responsibility, self determination, and pursuit of meaningful careers based on informed choice of individuals with disabilities.

So let's break that down just a little bit respect for individual dignity. Each individual that comes to us is different, and as a counselor, we really can't use one size fits all. So we need to make sure that we use culturally appropriate interventions with each individual that we work with. Looking at personal responsibility, well, that's the state of being responsible and accountable for something that's within one's power or control.

Self-determination is believing that you can control your own destiny. Self-determination is a combination of attitudes and abilities. And the pursuit of meaningful careers. What is it that gives you purpose in your life? What is it that gives you satisfaction? A meaningful career should align with someone's values and priorities and allows them to use their strengths and to be able to love what they're doing.

So what is informed choice? It's a process based on relevant knowledge consistent with the decision maker's values and goals. So we look at the decision maker as someone who's the captain of their own ship. So you see there's an image of a ship there, and they're driving their boat. They're in the driver's seat.

They are charting their own course. The role of a rehabilitation counselor is to facilitate the informed choice process for that eligible job seeker by helping them gather all the facts, prioritizing need, and making those choices. We do this with the job seeker. So you see the quote on this screen that says nothing about me without me.

And we shouldn't be assuming that someone needs something or wants something or that it's right for them without their participation and allowing that informed choice to guide the decision making. Now, in this screen, this is all part of informed choice, right? What do you want to be when you grow up?

How many times were you asked that as a child and how many times did you change your answer? So on this screen, we see a group of children dressed up as various occupations, and so as kids, we play, we role play, we pretend, and that's how we start to explore jobs or maybe something that we want to be when we grow up. It's very important, though, that we realize that if you can see it, you can be it. Representation matters.

Historically, people with disabilities have been marginalized and thought not capable of making any choice. So oftentimes, we may see the professionals and families operate from a mindset of we know best what you need and want to protect them and shield them from hardship. So while many times, there may be some good intentions, when we practice that kind of parental feeling towards someone with a disability, we're really stripping them of their autonomy and their ability to learn and make those informed choices.

The next quote on the screen is from Dr. Lorraine Kaminski, who's a global management consultant and who said, "I'm not different from you, I'm different like you." Each cultural expression, no matter how different from our own, is a thread in the fabric of humanity and therefore a part of who we are. While diversity speaks many languages, it values human integrity and accelerates progress and innovation through insight.

It's time we recognize diversity as a central pillar to how we do business so we can drive to systemic and meaningful change. So this is a reminder that regardless of how we identify, differences or something that we all have in common. So how do you make a choice, and on this slide, we have three doors. So when you have to make a decision or a choice about something you're not familiar with, what do you do?

Do you Google it? Do you call a friend or a family member? Do you talk with someone you trust? How about asking an expert? Do you do some research on your own?

Or do you talk with someone who has already made that choice or decision? Making choices is a skill that many individuals with disabilities have either not had the opportunity to learn or they haven't had much ability to practice it. Even the choice of coming to the vocational rehabilitation agency may not have been their choice, but one that was made by family or a school or maybe another governmental entity, such as parole and probation.

Making choices is really something that you have to practice over and over and over. Improving the skills that's needed to make informed choice is something that a VR counselor should help model that process with the individual to allow them to learn how to make a choice. Informed choice decision making process consists of the following, exploring options, identifying those available options, identifying both favorable and unfavorable consequences of each option, discussing relevant laws and policies, selecting an option from that then, and committing to and acting on that selected option.

It's a consumer centered consumer owned process. As a counselor, we need to make sure that we present information in an easy to understand manner and that we continue to always check in with the job seeker at various points of our meeting with them or within the process to make sure what is their understanding of what was just said or what is their understanding of the process? That could also mean we put things in writing, we say it verbally. However we need to break it down for that individual.

Oftentimes, I'll give the analogy of when you go to a doctor's office. So in the medical field, you may go to the doctor with a problem and they tell you, well, you're going to have to have this test or this procedure and we may not often actually question a doctor about that, because we may feel that a doctor or that medical professional knows best, right? They're the expert.

Sometimes, those doctors or medical experts may not always make themselves understood to the individual patient, and they may assume that you know something. Many times, that doctor or medical professional may not check and make sure that a patient understands instructions and they assume. So it's that way in the VR process.

We need to present information in several different manners, chunking it out or breaking it down for folks, and then checking along the way as to their understanding. The Rehabilitation Services Administration has issued three pieces of guidance that I have highlighted on this screen that really discuss at length about informed choice and how to help someone who comes into the office of a vocational rehabilitation agency with that. So those three are support services for individuals with cognitive disabilities and others who need assistance in implementing an informed choice.

Another is RSAs frequently asked questions. The criterion for an integrated employment location and the definition of competitive integrated employment and participant choice, and

the last one is implementation of informed choice. These are live links, so as you review this material, you can go to these and be able to download and print off these guidance.

In looking at the roles and responsibilities of the job seeker that comes to you, job seekers need to be active and full partners in the process. So I have a couple of questions here. Yes or no questions that I'd like you to take a moment and see if you know the answer. One, if the job seeker has an intellectual disability, for example, down syndrome, they are not able to make an informed choice. Is that yes or no?

And the second one, the job seeker's parent, guardian, or spouse can make all decisions? Yes or no? The answer to the first statement is not true. Individuals who have an intellectual disability are able to make an informed choice to the best of their ability, and it often means that we need to present information in different ways and in a different process so that they can make an informed choice.

For the second statement, as a VR counselor, it is our job to help a job seeker's parent, guardian, or spouse assist and support the individual with a disability in making a choice. So they could provide that support and assistance in however it appears. It could be simplifying information, it can be using pictures, it can be taking information and breaking it down into small chunks and providing them in a sequence so that they can understand. So let's take a moment and look at the roles and responsibilities of the VR counselor in this process of informed choice.

VR counselors should provide assistance and support. So two questions or statements on the screen. The first one is the VR counselor can use purchase checklist, inventories, and assessments to determine the job seeker skill and ability to implement informed choice, true or false? This is actually true.

As a counselor, you can purchase whatever may be needed in order to help your job seeker look at their skills, interests, strengths, and abilities so that it guides their informed choice. The second statement says that the VR counselor should not let family assist the job seeker in making choices, true or false? Well, that's false.

If the individual that comes to you-- as a job seeker wants their family to be involved in the process, we allow that. And oftentimes, it may be a delicate balance, because sometimes we have to also help the family learn how to help the job seeker in making an informed choice. Next, we look at the roles and responsibilities of the state VR agency in the process of informed choice.

As the VR agency, we must provide information and support services to assist in exercising informed choice throughout the VR process. The first true or false statement says, the VR agency must develop and implement written policies and procedures that enable job seekers to make an informed choice in regard to selection of a vocational goal, objectives, services they need, or the service providers for them, true or false? well, that is actually true, and that is why

every individual VR agency has written policies and procedures available to any of the individuals who come to the VR program and to the public.

The second statement says the VR agency should try to ensure that job seekers receive information about choice by giving them the federal law and regulations at application and at IPE development, true or false? I don't know about you, but if someone gave me a big copy of the federal law and regulations, I think I would chuck it in the recycling bin at the first opportunity. Again, it's giving the information to folks in a manner in which they can easily digest it, understand it, and federal law and regulations usually aren't written to be that user friendly, which is why the VR agency has to have written policies and procedures.

So giving your individual job seeker policies and procedures or showing them where that's available or giving them parts of it that is applicable at the time of application and at IPE development, such as discussing how to make informed choice and their rights and responsibilities within the VR process is clearly an important piece of the process. So using LMI as a VR counselor. As we've heard from Nichole in module 2, it's a core function of a VR counselor. So guiding job seekers to have that greater autonomy in doing some of the research to find job opportunities, asking them who is in their network, no matter how small their networks are, their circle of support.

We model how to take ownership of career choices, and we help instill a sense of empowerment with our job seekers. All of these are what we do as VR counselors. So how do we balance job seeker choice and labor market information? We do this in various ways. First, we start with good guidance and counseling, which is a core tenant of VR counselors.

For students with disabilities, we also now provide pre-employment transition services, because they are an early start to exploring career development, the world of work. We help individual job seekers explore some incongruency between what they want and what they need, and we assist in determining a job seeker's unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, and capabilities, and we do this with them. We also help them look at what are salary and income requirements that they may have?

Benefits counseling is very, very important, because that is-- really, they can't make it a career decision or an employment choice without looking at perhaps how this employment will affect benefits that they may be receiving or that may be important to them and the family. We help them look at is it a job or a career pathway that they're looking at? Gone are the days when someone gets into a job or a career for life and you stay there until you retire, but now, we have many choices.

And oftentimes, we see that people change careers multiple times throughout their lifetime. Choice and labor market information, it's a risk taking-- it's not knowing what the future may hold, but we take a risk in looking at things and making choices. And mistakes are how we learn. So it's OK to make a mistake, because we can go back and change that. Choice in and of itself does not mean getting everything you want, but that you receive the services necessary to attain a chosen employment goal.

And sometimes in working with the job seeker, we as VR counselors may not be able to totally support a career decision that they choose. But we can look at what parts we can support. When we look at the labor market trends, we look at it from a local, regional, state, and national level, or we may start with national and then break it down to state, regional, and local.

So as a counselor, we are reviewing data and information with the individual job seeker. We do this in various ways. We can look at our local county and state economic development offices and see what's trending.

We can look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and look at those five to 10 year occupational outlook projections. What is involved in that, looking at what are going to be the education, training, and experience that's needed now and in the future. What does that projected employment look like five years, 10 years out and those projected labor force measures.

But we just don't stop there. We also go and talk to people in the business or industry that we may have an interest in, and we can assist our job seekers with that. We also try to stay up to date with industry patterns or trends. And now, with the use of internet and many different resources, we can get that information much faster and quicker.

So what does employment look like though now in 2022 and beyond? Well, we know that the pandemic has changed the way we work and live. There have been so many substantial differences in how COVID-19 has affected industries and occupations, with everything from contact intensity to the ability to telework being the major drivers of this time and also looking at employment levels for people with and without a disability.

When we look at the end of 2021, there was a greater recovery in the labor market for persons with a disability, and that could be attributable to an overall increase in the access to teleworking, which allows for social distancing and helps to mitigate other barriers that may be found in the workplace accessibility and employment, including transportation that individuals with disabilities may commonly face. So the flexibilities that were provided to workers during the COVID pandemic, I think many of them may be here to stay. And so again, these conditions can result in expanded access to workforce activity for people with disabilities.

And it doesn't always mean that everyone has to have access to higher education and such, because they may be more focused on skills that are necessary to do the job. So it's really a different world out there, and the pandemic has helped to change that. Now, we're going to look at cultural considerations that are within this VR and informed choice process. We need to look at what does being culturally responsive mean when we're serving individual job seekers, students, and youth, and their families?

Multicultural competencies are framed upon three broad areas. A, the counselors awareness of his or her own cultural values and biases, counselors awareness of the job seeker's culture and values, and the counselors use of culturally appropriate intervention strategies. Often, we may have, as a counselor, a Western European view worldview that looks at everybody's an

individual, everybody has the autonomy to do whatever they want with their life, that opportunity is open to everyone who wants it.

That work is central and everybody's life, and that there's a linear process to career development and employment. So that model based on a Western European model really doesn't always apply to anyone of color or of a different gender, say, for instance, women or any other marginalized group. So as a counselor, we need to recognize how culture impacts our job seeker's job search and how they view going to work and career.

So that way, we need to be aware that in some cultures, a job seeker's goals may be communal rather than personal. It's a family decision and not the individual decision. We need to be aware that job seekers may be impacted by societal and institutional policies based on their color or gender or orientation, and we need to know and understand how poverty, discrimination, and racism and so forth can limit job seeker access to information.

That it may also inhibit that job seekers ability to take action and limit that scope of possibilities that they see for themselves. Remember, I said that if you can see it, you can be it. And so if somebody has never seen a Black female as a judge, it may not cross their mind that they could do that because they're Black and they're female. So we need to understand the expectations that families and cultural structures may place on job seekers in their work environments.

Equity and access in the workplace. So let's look at this. So although equity and equality sound similar, they're not synonymous. So let's look at equality. Equality seeks to provide all employees with access to the same resources, regardless of the pre-existing barriers that they may face. Equality can also push company culture in the right direction, but it often fails to address the problems of someone who's under-represented in the workforce or if there's an unfair status quo.

Equity is distinct from equality, because it doesn't provide the same resources and opportunities for everyone. When you have equity within your organization, that organization recognizes that each employee has varying access to resources and privileges, and those with less access may need more support in order to take advantage of opportunities within a given company. Example of this as a counselor is that when we're looking at equitable access and outcomes to the individuals who come to us seeking services, we may assume that access to computers and to internet is available to everyone, but it may not be given-- that can't be a given assumption for many people maybe in an underserved community.

Nor should we assume that they already have the technical know how to use a computer or any technology applications that we now find are so fundamental in entry into many of today's job markets. So in order to properly plan for a more equitable workplace, it's important to have a strong understanding of how these terms differ. And I'm going to show a little visual here next.

So on this screen, we see the difference between equality versus equity. So the picture shows a picture of a tree with apples. And for equality, we see that there are three employees, they are

all standing on the same box, same size box, but we have one employee who's probably 6 foot tall, the next employee is maybe 5 feet 5 inches tall, and the other employee is 5 feet.

And the only person here that can reach that apple is the 6 foot tall employee, so it's really not equal for everyone. But on the other side, we see the same tree of apples, and now, we've provided equity in reaching apples because we still have someone who's 6 foot tall, someone who's 5 feet 5 inches, and someone who's 5 feet tall. But now, the person who is 5 foot tall can reach the apple as easily as the 6 foot tall person because they have additional boxes stacked on top of each other so that they can reach it.

Help your job seeker recognize all career opportunities unrestricted by social and cultural expectations. Looking at non-traditional occupations for folks is great and a non-traditional occupation is defined as any occupation in which women or men comprise less than 25% of the workforce. Another career opportunity now-- and it's growing-- will be in the green sector jobs. So green jobs are either jobs and businesses that produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources.

Green jobs span across a wide range of industries from obvious ones like renewable energy to unexpected ones like in finance or fashion technologies or transportation, and it's one of the fastest growing sectors in areas like energy, mining, and it's so rapidly growing. So that is why I'm bringing special attention to that. Another career opportunity that's often not pushed or explored is entrepreneurship. So self-employment, and according to the latest figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of February of 2022, the number of self-employed people in the US is just under 10 million.

Again, great opportunity doesn't have to be something that we see in the want ads or on the job seeking websites. So let's look at the use of data for LMI. So as an agency and a counselor, we need to analyze the data to look at assessing what are those disparities in labor market outcomes among various populations that we serve. And we need to adapt and adjust maybe some goals and strategic focus if we are working in communities with disproportionately higher unemployment rates and where those individuals are getting lower earnings. So again, looking at underserved population groups or individuals who are facing barriers to employment, whether they be low income, English as a second language individuals who are without housing, and again, individuals with disabilities.

Career Index Plus, which is a resource that many of you are probably familiar with. VR agencies should be using this. It's a career information system. The Career Index Plus, or TCI+, as we call it, is a system that collects labor market information from a whole host of resources and deposits in a single user friendly site. It's free and the data is the most recent available.

So on this slide, we see just a snapshot of states that have very active TCI+ usage, with North Dakota being at the top. And I think that North Dakota has select staff who use it all the time so why they're at the top of the list. California, Florida, Connecticut, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan are all in this top list, and again, using this is a great tool in working with consumers,

job seekers that you're coming across every day. On this slide, we look at the importance of rapid engagement.

San Diego State University did a data association research looking at the speed to plan and then VR outcomes nationwide using program year 2019 information, and you'll see on the screen that the highest number here and the less time that you spend in getting someone to plan the VR outcome increases my use of the day. So one day or less, 51% of those folks are rehabilitated as compared to then two to 30 days in the process. Dropped down to 50.6, 31 to 60 days, down at 48.5%, all the way down to if someone is spending 151 days or more before planned outcome, it drops down to 40.8.

So this slide really speaks to that rapid engagement, discussing career choices and exploring that to be an successful case for a VR consumer, job seeker, and counselor. Career pathways are very critical to helping our job seekers and you as a VR counselor be able to report measurable skill gains and credential attainment. So under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, WIOA, there are performance indicators now that all of us have to meet. And it's much more than a 26 successful closure.

The credential is based on a recognition of measurable technical and industry occupational skills, and it's based on standards endorsed by the industry for employers and of course measurable skilled gains defined by documented academic, technical, occupational, or other forms of progress. So again, towards a credential or employment. That's what we're being measured on, and that's what the workforce is expecting now.

Informed choice is an ongoing process, and this quote is from the US Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona. Where he says, "Economic security should be available to all Americans. Providing individuals with disabilities with a high quality education and the services that they need to thrive will result in real pay for real jobs, empowering them and leading to greater social and economic inclusion." So the more you practice informed choice, the easier it gets, and it's not a one and done.

Shared a few resources with you, which we will also go over in module 4 in more depth. But on this screen, we have the Career Index Plus, and the workforce GPS, which explores implementing green initiatives. And again, talks about those green sector jobs that I mentioned. This resource is great even to share with your job seekers, because it's information you can listen to.

Some clips are either two minutes to 10 minutes long, but it gives you a lot of audio or video clips about certain labor market information on different topics or targeted populations. I want to thank you very much for your time today, and my contact information is on this last slide, cj1957@gwu.edu. Thank you.