

Assessing Brain Injury Needs — While Keeping the Job Seeker Engaged

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“Following your application for employment services, we will have 60 days to determine if you are eligible. After that, we’ll have 90 days to write your plan for employment — longer if we need additional time. And it looks like we can get you scheduled for a neuropsychological evaluation in about seven weeks.”

If these messages sound familiar, they are some of the historical time frames associated when getting involved through vocational rehabilitation. I personally used this language often when helping applicants, specifically people with brain injury, learn what to expect when getting started with my field office.

Eligibility and planning processes are very important, and they require thoughtful and thorough approaches to holistically serve job seekers. However, states are increasingly looking at ways to streamline those processes and more quickly start someone down the road to achieving employment. Expeditious methods are better for everyone — the job seeker, the counselor, and the business.”

In discussions with public vocational rehabilitation programs, I’m hearing about rapid engagement as a growing priority. We know that rapid engagement is a tenant of evidence-based employment programs such as Individual Placement and Support. It’s clear that approaches of 1) connecting with job seekers where they are and 2) minimizing long waits to initiate employment services and supports are gaining ground within employment programs. At the same time, states and systems are learning about the significant intersection of brain injury among many populations served within employment programs. Individuals with a criminal or juvenile justice background, those who have experienced partner violence or housing vulnerability and homelessness, along with individuals with behavioral health conditions, represent special populations who frequently experience hidden and undiagnosed brain injury.

Ascertaining the needed assessments for someone who has experienced brain injury takes a tailored approach. When I worked in vocational rehabilitation during the 1990s, if an individual was known or suspected to have a brain injury, the routine first step was to schedule a comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation. This multidimensional approach has been used historically to identify primary and secondary diagnoses, determine the nature and severity of cognitive difficulties, determine functional limitations, and plan treatment and rehabilitation. Comprehensive neuropsychological evaluations can be the linchpin for a successful

employment outcome. They can also be costly, may take a long period of time to schedule, may be a nonexistent resource in a rural area, and sometimes require extensive effort on the part of a person with brain injury who may be experiencing cognitive fatigue as a predominant symptom. Because a neuropsychological evaluation is a snapshot of a point in time during recovery, past findings may not be reflective of current functioning.

Examining what an individual living with brain injury needs in terms of moving forward on an employment path may lead an employment service provider to a variety of different options for understanding current functioning related to a prospective job goal. Consider these options and which might work best for the unique situation and experience.

Speech-Language Assessment

A speech language pathologist may be able to meet and evaluate an individual living with brain injury seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce. This might include the administration of a brief cognitive assessment, such as the Woodcock-Johnson IV, followed by tailored exercises to examine current functioning. For example, if an individual is interested in a customer service occupation, functional tasks can be assigned to observe time management and the ability to prioritize and manage interruptions. By understanding areas of strength and challenge, treatment can be planned to address and improve those skills in preparation for job search.

Functional Neurocognitive Testing

Functional neurocognitive testing (FNT) taps into the use of neuropsychological screening batteries and involves assessing brain functioning through brief, computerized or paper/pencil instruments. Unlike standardized tests, FNT can be administered quickly, inexpensively, and episodically to examine functional issues, aid in employment and service planning, and monitor treatment gains. Fast turnaround results keep the employment planning process moving forward while work interest and motivation are at their peak.



Neuropsychological screening batteries are a relatively new resource that systems are implementing through the training of Masters-level professionals to objectively and briefly

examine areas of concern associated with brain injury. Examples of neuropsychological screen batteries include a computerized neurocognitive test (CNT) called the Automated Neuropsychological Assessment Metric (ANAM), a paper and pencil test called the Neuropsychological Assessment Battery (NAB), and a readily available single-page screening tool called the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA).

Discovery

As states expand and bolster their customized employment efforts, many are realizing that evidence-based, “discovery” processes are broadly applicable and helpful in the identification of strengths, needs, and interests from an asset-focused perspective. Discovery sheds light on a person’s talents and passions —from their point of view and with input from members of their circle of support (family members, friends, former co-workers, teachers, etc.). When discovery services are offered to an individual with a brain injury, person-centered results can subsequently inform employment planning.

Functional Capacity Evaluation

When physical concerns serve as a primary employment barrier resulting from brain injury, e.g., discoordination, balance, etc., a functional capacity evaluation performed by a physician or allied health professional may be appropriate. Specifics on the physical capabilities and potential workplace barriers can inform the employment planning and job analysis processes.

Partial Neuropsychological Evaluation

Sometimes a counselor can negotiate what can be referred to as a partial neuropsychological evaluation to reduce the time and expense of a full, comprehensive evaluation. Assessments are administered through a tailored approach in response to specific referral questions necessary for an individual’s unique, employment planning process. A short list of referral question examples include:

- Are the referral’s complaints congruent with the nature of the injury? Are there other factors present (e.g., depression) that could be contributing to the cognitive presentation of the referral?
- What cognitive remediation or behavioral health interventions are recommended for the referral to prepare for their stated work goal?
- Is the referral experiencing an attentional problem or a memory retrieval deficit?

- What are the employment considerations and recommendations related to the referral's stated cognitive fatigue concerns?
- What factors should be considered related to the referral's delayed processing symptoms as they prepare to participate in college courses?

Comprehensive Neuropsychological Evaluation

Neuropsychological evaluations focus on neurobehavioral disorders, cognitive processes, and brain disorders. These areas of focus distinguish this type of evaluative approach from a general psychological evaluation which focuses more on behavior and emotion as well as recommendations for therapeutic treatment. Generally, neuropsychological evaluations are more in depth and broader in scope.

There are certainly times when a full, comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation is needed. They may be warranted, for example, when a diagnosis is necessary for service access. When a person has experienced multiple, complicated brain injuries and strategies to address symptoms don't seem to be working, a broader set of objective tests may be needed for employment planning. Sometimes individuals with significant, co-occurring conditions, for example behavioral health, might benefit from a more extensive evaluation. Employment service providers turn to this level of evaluation when multiple areas of functioning are necessary to examine, and the results are typically provided to the individual living with brain injury and family members, if appropriate, through a feedback session.

Here's the takeaway. Assessments for employment planning to support people living with brain injury are not "one-size fits all". As public employment programs work to engage job seekers rapidly and maintain client momentum and motivation, it is beneficial to consider the assessments or evaluations that make sense to initiate the employment journey. Additional or more extensive assessments can be utilized when the need presents itself. An assessment need, for example, could arise as a result of new concerns during an educational program or when a solution is sought for the purposes of job retention.



Want additional information? [The National Association of State Head Injury Administrators](#) (NASHIA) has an assortment of resources and training opportunities on its website and can provide connections to brain injury subject matter experts in states.