

**ASSESSMENT FOR AT-RISK YOUTH:**

**A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO  
DEFINITIONS, GUIDING PRINCIPLES, AND  
IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

**A COMPANION DOCUMENT TO THE  
ASSESSMENT TRAINERS' TOOL KIT**

*prepared for the*

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
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*by the*

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## FOREWORD

The U.S. Department of Labor is sponsoring a series of subject-specific train-the-trainer workshops in support of the implementation of the JTPA Amendments of 1992. These workshops represent the initial offerings of the capacity building network as authorized by the Amendments. In most cases, the Guides (TAGS) and training materials that form the foundation for each workshop are based on research conducted by training contractors, under DOL sponsorship. The workshop training activities present key findings of the research that can be applied to the JTPA system and reinforce practical skills related to the TAGs.

This Practitioner's Guide on Assessment for At-Risk Youth serves as a companion piece to the Tool Kit, also prepared by Brandeis. This publication is one in a series of guides that has been developed to complement turnaround training at the state and local level. In addition to this workshop, other workshop topics in the series include:

- » **Assessment:** Issues addressed include information necessary to design client assessment and individual Service Strategies. Also discussed are self-evaluation of assessment practices, alternative organizational structures for assessment components, and selection of appropriate assessment methods and instruments.
- » **Case Management:** Issues discussed include case management at the client and systems levels.
- » **SDA Monitoring of Service Providers:** Issues discussed include procedures and instruments for use by SDAs in monitoring contractors or service providers. Emphasis is on program quality for nine service activities and compliance requirements for general financial management and payroll.
- » **Targeting, Outreach and Recruitment:** Issues discussed include effective tools for planning, evaluating and conducting targeting, outreach and recruitment activities at the SDA level. Also discussed are the best practice methods and techniques, names of knowledgeable persons and clarifications of related portions of the Act and regulations.
- » **On-The Job Training (OJT):** Issues discussed include developing quality OJT programs that are competency driven, have measurable outcomes, and meet the longterm needs of the participant. Also addressed are implications of the amendments on the OJT program design.
- » **State Oversight:** Training for State staff responsible for JTPA oversight is based on two technical assistance guides. One guide concerns program compliance requirements and the other focuses on monitoring SDAs program quality.

The training manuals and summaries, in conjunction with the ~~Trainer's Primer~~, provide a basis for developing training tailored to the needs of the State and SDA personnel. Users are encouraged to adapt the materials presented and incorporate their experience and their expertise into subsequent turnaround training provided at the State and local level.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **WHY ANOTHER GUIDE ON ASSESSMENT?**

Employability assessment for at-risk youth has drawn legislative and programmatic attention over the last several years. Many papers, speeches, and headlines have heralded progress as well as setbacks on this subject. Why then is it necessary to prepare not just another **Practitioner's Guide** on this topic but a comprehensive **Trainer's Tool Kit** and **Decision Maker's Summary** as well?

Isn't it common knowledge that assessment is a critical component of quality and cost-effective programming in employment and training systems? Every experienced practitioner knows this, and many have cultivated an assessment vision or philosophy at the local level. However, it seems that many other practitioners (and, more importantly, many of the young people in JTPA programs) are still not gaining all or even some of the benefits of a comprehensive, integrated, quality assessment system. In the course of our research, and in the process of working with more than 100 service delivery areas on these issues, we uncovered many reasons assessment systems are not being developed, implemented, and operated in such a way that they contribute to quality and cost-effective programming. Some of these reasons are technical, some political.

Many youth practitioners have reported that they understand the importance of assessment and the basic components of assessment, but have been frustrated repeatedly in attempts to face the above challenges and put the "best practices" into use. This **Practitioner's Guide** is designed for them. Consequently, the **Guide** (and its companion **Decision Maker's Summary** and **Trainer's Tool Kit**) goes beyond the essential components of a comprehensive, integrated, quality assessment system and begins to answer these important questions:

- » Why isn't knowledge about assessment being translated into the formulation of quality systems for at-risk youth?
- » What are the current challenges around assessment?
- » What strategies can lead to the effective development, implementation, and operation of quality assessment systems which include all the essential components and gain all the benefits?
- » What is keeping practitioners from using assessment strategies effectively?
- » And how can practitioners manage so as to promote and maintain quality in their assessment systems?

The **Practitioner's Guide** is organized in five parts:

- » Section One sets the context. It suggests a working definition of assessment for at-risk youth, presents the reasons why assessment is an important part of developing effective programming for at-risk youth, summarizes the current status of youth assessment systems, and provides an overview of the legislative context for assessment.
- » Section Two highlights the underlying principles that guide the development of a meaningful strategy for at-risk youth. While these principles are not new, they are underutilized. Our purpose in reviewing them here is to challenge the system to change old thinking and old habits so as to serve the current generation of at-risk youth effectively.
- » Section Three offers strategies for putting the assessment principles to work.
- » Section Four examines what gets in the way of implementing really good employability assessment systems.
- » Section Five presents a management strategy that will ensure that the quality of the assessment process is maintained. This section recommends adapting a "Managing for Quality" strategy for the purposes of quality control and quality improvement of assessment systems.

## **SECTION ONE SETTING THE CONTEXT**

### **DEFINING TODAY'S AT-RISK YOUTH**

Assessment strategies must be context-specific and youth-centered. That is, they need to be designed and implemented based on a solid understanding of the program's target youth population. The process involved in carefully defining the population to be served ensures that communities fully understand and build consensus around allocating limited resources and designing appropriate programs.

**Using Group Characteristics.** The traditional approach to defining today's at-risk youth is to use demographic characteristics. Practitioners have long known that youth who share certain demographic factors -- such as low-income status, racial minority, school dropout, teen parent, welfare recipient -- are at high risk of long-term unemployment. Many communities therefore use these or other demographic characteristics to define "at-risk youth" and then design services to meet the needs of youth who meet that profile.

However, using group characteristics as the sole determinant of who is at risk has several significant drawbacks. First, group characteristics are really proxies for more specific skill deficits and social problems. They are not easily compared to employer requirements in defining employability, nor are they readily translated into needs that can guide a service strategy. As such, their value as a basis for individual assessment and community planning is limited. Second, using group characteristics as a basis for targeting means that some youth are likely to be arbitrarily defined as "at risk" when their skill levels do not justify that definition. Without information that is more specific than demographic characteristics, practitioners are limited in their ability to make quality choices about allocating resources.

**Using a Skills-Based Approach.** As employers increasingly emphasize employability skills as the primary determinant in their hiring decisions, practitioners are increasingly responding by defining youth at-risk based on deficits in or level of, employability skills, especially functional basic skills and/or pre-employment/work maturity skills.

A skills-based approach lets practitioners define "at-riskness" in relation to the employability skills required by local employers; those most at risk of long-term dependency are those with the lowest level of employability skills. Another advantage of defining youth at risk based on skill level is that it enables practitioners to assess the different needs within the at-risk population very specifically, e.g., individuals testing above or below specified reading and math levels. This lets program operators develop appropriate curricula and program designs for meeting different levels of need within the population, and allows targeting and planning decisions to be made with more precision.

Despite its advantages, however, a skills-based approach fails to take into account the group characteristics that have proven to be social or cultural barriers to employment.

**Using a Mix of Skills and Characteristics.** By combining skill measures and group characteristics, practitioners can develop a "hybrid" definition of at-risk youth that includes, for example, those who are dropouts, or minorities, or teen parents, and who lack specific educational and/or work skills. A hybrid definition lets practitioners target youth with clearly specified employment skills needs while also formally recognizing some of the social and cultural factors that exacerbate the risks of failure in the labor market. This approach may help JTPA and other youth-serving agencies to develop common definitions and a common approach to assessing participants.

## **DEFINING ASSESSMENT**

Once you have defined at-risk youth, the first step in developing, implementing, and operating an effective assessment system is reaching agreement on a working definition of assessment. As defined in Curnan and Fiala's "Assessing Employability for Results (National Governor's Association, 1986):

"Assessment is the on-going process of determining an individual client's strengths and skill deficits relative to job requirements and employer expectations; selecting an appropriate service strategy; and measuring the client's progress in skills acquisition using explicit and formal criteria."

Since assessment is an ongoing process, it is important to look at when, how, and why various assessment activities occur as the youth moves from program entry to program exit. Assessment information must be used for more than intake procedures and eligibility determination. Rather, assessment goes beyond those two functions to include a host of activities that result in ongoing youth-centered employability planning and accountability. An ongoing, comprehensive assessment process has these components:

- » **Appraisal** of a youth's level of employability, including capabilities, interests, and other characteristics, so as to determine eligibility and make initial service assignments.
- » **In-depth assessment**, to diagnose each individual youth's needs using a variety of tools and techniques, to provide feedback on results of diagnosis, and to develop an appropriate employability development plan (EDP) that matches services to the youth's individual needs.
- » **Monitoring or benchmarking progress** through ongoing assessment, thereby creating a series of "wins" (interim successes) for the youth. Information collected and evaluated through monitoring helps practitioners revise or modify employability



development plans based on new information, and enables them to provide feedback and counseling based on assessment results.

- » **Documenting and certifying** the achievement of goals. Post-assessment results provide information on whether the youth is ready for employment.

## **WHY IS ASSESSMENT IMPORTANT?**

As we stated earlier, employability assessment is the key to quality and cost-effective programming. Youth employment and training programs cannot work towards employment outcomes or determine which training and services are necessary to achieve social and economic self-sufficiency unless there is some process in place for determining youth needs relative to labor market requirements. This information also becomes the basis for documenting individual progress and certifying individual accomplishments.

At the program level, assessment information is the main component of employability development planning, which lays out the steps to be taken along a path to self-sufficiency. Assessment information contributes to employability development planning by:

- » helping match services to individual client needs;
- » providing the base for developing exit criteria that ensure that individuals have achieved proficiency levels (i.e., competency) for the different basic academic, work maturity, and job skills being taught; and
- » helping practitioners update EDPs with the new information gained through interim assessment and monitoring.

At the systems level, assessment provides information to help increase the effectiveness and efficiency of job training services. Assessment information helps answer questions such as:

- » Who do we want to serve?
- » What outcomes do we want to achieve?
- » What training and service needs have to be met?

In short, when it works well, **assessment is the method for dealing with the complex array of services and organizing them to match youth needs.**

The following chart defines assessment at different levels of the employment and training system:

Level	Benefit
Individual Client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•On-going method of defining goals and determining where the youth is relative to goals</li> </ul>
Program level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Method of defining outcomes based on employer expectations.</li> <li>•Information gathered and interpreted to make decisions about eligibility, program assignment, benchmarking and progress and certification</li> </ul>
Employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Nondiscriminatory method for selecting/hiring</li> <li>•Based on skills and abilities</li> </ul>
Systems level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Process for answering policy level questions: Who do you want to serve? What outcomes do you want to achieve? What services do you need to get there?</li> <li>•Use aggregate assessment data to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of training services.</li> </ul>

## **LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT FOR STRENGTHENED ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS**

At the national level, there has been a strong legislative push underscoring the importance of assessment since the Job Training Partnership Act was enacted in 1982. The current legislative environment not only encourages, but in many cases mandates, the development, implementation, and operation of quality assessment systems.

**JTPA.** A basic assumption of the original JTPA legislation was the necessity to review and document through assessment in order to determine what services an individual should receive. The 1988 Job Training Partnership Advisory Committee recommended the use of more in-depth diagnostic assessments to improve quality of services, and called for the development of more effective and sophisticated assessment systems for serving disadvantaged populations with serious skill deficits and multiple needs. The JTPA amendments require that each participant be assessed as the basis for an individually tailored service plan. The amendments call for the use of assessment systems to: identify and select participants; determine and verify eligibility; identify participant skill levels and service needs; specify the competency levels to be achieved

and serviced to be provided; and evaluate individuals' progress toward achieving competencies.

**JOBS.** The Social Security Act requires states to operate a Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. Initial assessment of each participant is required regarding educational and supportive service needs, skills, prior work experience, and employability levels. Assessment results must be used to create an Employability Development Plan (EDP). However, beyond this individual-level assessment, JOBS requires states to conduct a systems-level assessment as a way to determine future service demands, improve targeting efficiency, and assure that participants receive training that is linked to labor market demands and results in positive outcomes.

**Vocational Education.** The Vocational Education and Applied Technology Act of 1990, which amended the Perkins Vocational Education Act, expanded the state's responsibility to develop and implement performance standards and measures, to perform initial state assessments and annual program evaluations, and to use the resulting data in the state plan.

**Literacy.** The National Literacy Act of 1991 emphasizes the need for assessment. The Act established a National Institute for Literacy and requires it to conduct basic and applied research and demonstrations on the assessment of literacy skills and the development of instructional techniques, and to include assessment tools in a national database. Grants fund national strategies to determine appropriate assessments of workers' literacy and basic skill needs. States must use their basic adult education grant to develop and implement quality indicators that are consistent with JTPA, Perkins, and JOBS standards.

**The challenge for practitioners and policy makers alike is to support improved content for instructional effectiveness, rather than simply more assessment for compliance purposes.**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SECTION TWO</b> <b>NINE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ASSESSMENT</b></p>
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Practitioners from around the country have convinced us that the key operational points made in Section One of this **Practitioner's Guide** and elaborated upon in assessment literature, are "being missed," if only by degrees in some places. In practice, **the importance of content has given way to a focus on structure.** Findings from the recent National Evaluation of Youth Employment Competency Systems (YEC) support this observation:

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the content rather than the form of YEC programs. Monitoring efforts have focused primarily on whether YEC programs are consistent with the form of a sufficiently developed system. SDAs have, by in large, conformed to requirements; the framework for YEC programs is in place in most SDAs.

What is required now is more attention to the content of those programs.<sup>1</sup>

Put differently, there seems to be a **blurring of the line between "compliance testing" and the field's general desire to improve learning opportunities for youth through adequate and authentic "instructional assessments."**

Programs must clearly identify why they are assessing. The rationale for assessment generally falls into three categories:

1. To be in compliance -- with the law and the regulations only.
2. To be accountable -- to the clients, to the program itself, and to the community the program serves. Using assessment for this purpose lets programs document results based on individual young people's attainments relative to their individual needs.
3. To develop employability -- to use assessment information to move individual youth through a continuum of services based on their needs and goals.

However, compliance alone is an inadequate basis for assessment. All programs seeking quality improvements need to assess for accountability and employability development purposes. Assessment systems that are developed to promote accountability and employability development will easily be in compliance with the law and regulations. The reverse approach -- developing systems specifically for compliance purposes -- may or may not result in systems which have value to the learner. Accountability is a good thing when the focus for design is on being accountable to the primary customer -- the at-risk youth.

The principles below summarize the key elements of exemplary assessment systems that promote instructional effectiveness:

1. **Good assessment systems begin with a thorough understanding of who is being assessed and what they are being assessed for.** All staff engaged in assessing at-risk youth must understand the characteristics of adolescence. Likewise, they need to ensure that various assessment tools and strategies are true measures of basic skills, problem-solving, reasoning, attitude, and the other elements that define employability.
2. **Assessment is an ongoing process,** not a single testing event or even a series of intermittent events. Assessment is interwoven throughout intake, skill diagnosis, service planning, progress monitoring, and outcome. Staff involved in all these program components need to be trained in assessment (at various levels) and their observations need to be sought and used.

3. **Assessment is a complex process made up of varying subprocesses** - **measuring** or collecting information, **evaluating** the information, **making judgments** about the information, and **assigning consequences** based on the information. All of these subprocesses must be in place in order for assessment to be done in a quality way. Practitioners usually describe their assessment sequence as a series of steps, each with a discrete beginning and end; in reality, a quality assessment process is a sequence of subprocesses that overlap in time and space. Staff need to realize that assessment is a continuous thread winding through all other program components.
4. **Assessment tools and strategies are only valid when used for the purposes for which they were designed.** Even the best tools and strategies are commonly misused. The name of a test is not always a good indication of its intended use. For example, a "reading test" that has been designed to measure a young person's *vocabulary* is only valid for that specific purpose; it will not be effective for judging reading *comprehension*.
5. **Assessment must be connected to program design** and should gather only information which has a specific purpose and can be addressed by the program. Assessments in youth employment programs should help policymakers identify their target population, their desired outcomes, and the mix of services necessary to achieve those outcomes. Assessment measurements in youth employment programs must relate to employer requirements and expectations.
6. **Employability assessment tests what a young person knows or can do relative to labor market skill requirements.** Thus, employability assessment must be individualized, incorporating a variety of tools and techniques that provide multiple opportunities for youth to apply their skills in a work-relevant context.
7. **Assessment results must be used to match youth with instructional programs and work experiences at appropriate levels of intensity.** This is the only way assessment can promote instructional improvement. Too often, in employment and training, we expect one test or assessment system to serve both compliance and instructional improvement purposes. For assessment to promote instructional improvement, the assessment process must identify each individual youth's existing skill levels and skill gaps so that we know exactly what is needed in order to bring that youth's abilities up to the labor market's minimum employability level. Each individual may need intensive, mid-level, or minimal intervention; the level of intensity of the intervention will be different for each individual, and even for the same individual as related to different skill and knowledge areas.
8. **All staff can be part of the assessment process.** Because quality assessment is an ongoing process that permeates all components of a youth

employment program, all staff -- from receptionist to counselor -- should be trained (at varying levels) to assess employability. This investment in staff training is critical: it provides multiple opportunities for youth to demonstrate their skills, helps maintain quality control and cost control, and acknowledges that the assessment process begins the moment the youth walks in the door.

9. **In a "case management system," the case manager often has primary responsibility for ensuring that the assessment system serves each youth well.** The case manger makes sure that assessment data are utilized throughout the employability development planning process and that the young person understands how each type of assessment relates to the various components of his/her service plan.

**SECTION THREE  
IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES  
FOR PUTTING PRINCIPLES TO WORK**

Seasoned practitioners have found the following strategies effective in implementing quality assessment systems for at-risk youth:

- 1. Create a new paradigm for thinking about assessment.**
- 2. Directly assess skills relevant to the labor market.**
- 3. Provide multiple assessment opportunities for youth.**
- 4. Connect assessment to instruction and worksite training by changing curriculum so what you teach is what you test.**
- 5. Measure competence within the context of employability readiness, not classroom learning.**
- 6. Develop and implement a cohesive, well-thought out staff training and development plan to support the assessment system.**

**1. CREATE A NEW PARADIGM FOR THINKING ABOUT ASSESSMENT.**

Practitioners need to start with a strong philosophical base about assessment to develop an effective assessment system. Not only must they understand the nine guiding principles of assessment that are discussed in Section Two, but they must also advocate for them, teach them to others, and work to institutionalize them.

Practitioners who struggle with the daily challenges of operating a program often find it easy to think of assessment as "only a test." This thinking suggests they need only to purchase an off-the-shelf test and administer it as a pre-test and post-test in order to have a quality assessment system that is easy and cost-effective. In a recent CHR practitioner survey, the questions practitioners most frequently asked about assessment were:

- » What test should I use?
- » How can I incorporate these new ideas about assessment into the system we

currently have in place?

The prevalence of these questions shows the need for a dramatic shift in thinking. The reality is that no single test can do it all. And, significant changes often need to be made to current systems in order to incorporate the principles of assessment.

However, although assessment should permeate every component of an employment and training program, assessment is only one of the issues that practitioners must deal with on a daily basis. Therefore, development and implementation of a quality assessment system requires that every staff member and decision maker understand and support the guiding principles of assessment so that the subprocesses that comprise the assessment process -- collecting information, evaluating information, judging information, and assigning consequences based on information -- become an ingrained part of the program.

Thinking about assessment as a thread running through all the other program components provides a new way to emphasize that all staff members need to get involved in collecting assessment data. Each staff member has responsibility for some part of the four subprocesses that make up the assessment process. An important part of this new paradigm is that the sequence of subprocesses that make up the assessment process are not linear; rather, they overlap and build on each other.

This new paradigm of assessment as an ongoing information collection process means that, at various points, staff take a "time out" and use the information they have collected to make a judgment. The type of judgment that is appropriate at any given time -- appraisal, diagnosis, benchmark, or certification -- depends on the quality and quantity of information available, and the implication of the judgment (that is, the consequence assigned as a result of the judgment).

## **2. DIRECTLY ASSESS SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE LABOR MARKET.**

No assessment system can be effective without a clear, agreed upon definition of employability. Assessment is the process by which to measure an individual's strengths and skill deficits **relative to job requirements, employer expectations, and individual goals**; therefore, any assessment system needs to start with an understanding of job requirements, employer expectations, and the individual youth's goals.

Rapid technological change, innovation, and heightened competition have changed the American workplace. These workplace changes have changed the skills employees need in order to achieve long-term success in the workforce. American companies are moving away from the "Taylor" work environment in which a few educated planners and supervisors oversee large numbers of line workers performing simple, repetitive tasks.



# **ASSESSMENT SEQUENCE**

**MEASURE**

**CONSEQUENCE**

**EVALUATION**

**JUDGEMENT**

MEASURE-----> EVALUATION-----> JUDGEMENT-----> CONSEQUENCES

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This method -- well-suited for mass production at inexpensive prices -- is not effective at achieving the high quality products and services, variety, and responsiveness to change that are needed to compete in today's global marketplace.

The high performance work organization is replacing the Taylor work environment. In this model, front-line workers have increasing levels of responsibility; this results in increases in flexibility, quality, and productivity. High performance work organizations require new business strategies such as: collaboration, exemplary customer service, total quality management, and participatory management.

### **What does this mean in terms of employability skills?**

The key to new work environments is a highly trained workforce made up of workers who possess a broader set of skills. Employees are increasingly expected to serve as decision makers at the point of production or sale.

The traditional basic skills -- "the 3 Rs," reading, writing, and arithmetic -- are no longer sufficient for workplace success. As the information processing demands of most occupations have grown, basic employability skills have evolved to include higher-level thinking skills, the capacity to learn new tasks, and the ability to solve increasingly complex problems. The Committee for Economic Development noted several years ago that "mastery of the old basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic may be sufficient for entry-level jobs, but because of the constantly changing nature of work, minimum skills are not sufficient preparation for career advancement. Schools must make a greater effort to develop higher level skills, such as problem solving, reasoning, and learning ability."<sup>2</sup>

Work maturity expectations have also changed over time and grown more sophisticated. At one level, the change is minimal -- studies of employer hiring requirements still tend to focus on the basic work maturity elements -- punctuality, regular attendance, positive attitudes and behaviors, and the like. But as with the other basic employability skills, the definition of work maturity is also changing in important ways.

As employers look at new ways of organizing the workplace, they are increasingly emphasizing more sophisticated social skills as essential for even entry-level employees. The American Society for Training and Development has included personal management, group effectiveness, and leadership skills among the skills necessary for success in the labor market.<sup>3</sup> The recent report of the Secretary's Commission on the Acquisition of Necessary Skills called for what it termed "workplace know-how" and placed heavy emphasis on a series of sophisticated "interpersonal skills" as one of the core sets of competencies required by the high performance work environment.<sup>4</sup> Those skills included teamwork, teaching others, serving clients/customers, exercising leadership, negotiating, and working with cultural diversity. Even relatively unskilled workers must have the interpersonal skills necessary to deal with co-workers and customers.

America is looking for a new kind of worker, one who possesses higher-order thinking skills which include problem-solving skills, listening skills, negotiation skills, creativity, and the ability to set goals. This is occurring at a time when more and more of the clients for employment and training programs enter our doors with fewer and fewer skills. In short, employers want employees who know how to learn and adapt to the changing workplace. **To meet these enhanced employer expectations, the employment and training system needs to address and upgrade assessment and competency systems** and begin to "retool" to provide more intensive, longer term training.

Defining Employability: The Local Process. In defining employability skills, practitioners need to start with employers. Local definitions of employability, and the assessment systems built around them, are useful only if area employers concur. Employer validation (more than just PIC approval) is essential.

Practitioners identify three approaches to employer validation: employer-specific, occupation-specific, and entry-level-specific. All involve direct contact with area employers, and all involve analyzing local jobs and their skill requirements. They differ in the degree of analysis of individual employer contact and/or occupational specificity that is involved. Employer- and occupation-specific approaches provide opportunities to build relationships with local businesses and tailor a system to their needs, but at a higher cost in terms of time and effort.

- Employer-specific validation involves job task analysis for each entry-level position in a specific firm to identify the basic employability skills required to perform each task. When tabulated, the information indicates the basic employability skills required for entry-level employment with that particular employer. When repeated with other employers within the community, the process leads to **a profile of a "generic worker" in the local labor market.**
- Occupationally-specific employer validation focuses on job requirements in a specific occupation (e.g., brick-layer, office worker, etc.) All employers who hire that type of worker identify the requirements for specific entry-level positions; this information is used to define entry-level requirements for that occupation. Those requirements are then tabulated with those in other occupations, yielding a set of **generic employability skills.**
- Entry-level-specific employer validation begins with many employers identifying the basic employability skills required for any entry-level employment. Through surveys and focus groups, employers identify those skills they consider important and explain how their employees use those skills. The resulting information is used to identify **a series of functional basic employability skills used by the generic entry-level employee.**

Regardless of approach, employer validation is an important part of the process of creating an employability assessment system. It is critical to work with the business community to decide what skills to assess and what proficiency levels are necessary to achieve competency in specific skill areas.

### **3. PROVIDE MULTIPLE ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH.**

**Different Measurement Strategies.** As they rethink the basic skills and work skills that youth and adults need to succeed in the workforce, practitioners and policymakers are taking a fresh look at how those skills should be assessed. In the past year alone, two major reports -- the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy's **From Gatekeeper to Gateway**, and the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce's **America's Choice** -- have questioned the value and use of traditional, norm-referenced, multiple choice tests alone as accurate indicators of individual skills and achievement. Rather, they argue that a combination of indicators is needed to provide a complete picture of achievement. Noting the need for fairer, more realistic methods of measuring ability, both Commissions have argued for use of more direct, "authentic" forms of assessment.

Among practitioners, there has been a similar movement towards what is often called "alternative assessment" -- that is, assessment through means other than paper-and-pencil, norm-referenced tests. The development of criterion-referenced assessment tools is a direct result of the interest of employment practitioners in focusing assessment on measuring specific, workplace-related competencies and the individual's ability to apply those competencies in the kinds of situations they are likely to encounter in real life.

Many practitioners are working on the cutting edge in this area. One alternative being widely explored is **performance-based assessment**. Performance-based assessment is the direct observation and review of the application of skills against set criteria. Using portfolios of student work, demonstrations, group projects, and other activities, performance-based assessment directly examines how individuals use their knowledge and skills in realistic situations, rather than measuring skills indirectly through some form of written multiple choice test.

Once again, careful use of language is important in the serious exploration of alternative assessment approaches. "Performance assessment" and "authentic assessment" are often used interchangeably; however, they are not the same. "Performance assessment" refers to the types of responses you wish to elicit from the learner (e.g., a behavior, a product). "Authentic assessment" refers to the context in which the learner responds.<sup>5</sup> For example, our current systems always impose time restrictions on testing. To make a performance assessment authentic (i.e., to relate it to the world of work), one must relate the time constraint to the skill, behavior, knowledge being demonstrated. Rather than debating whether or not tests should be timed, we need to ask whether a real worker, using the skill being tested, would be timed as s/he used that skill on the job; if so, we need to determine what a realistic time constraint for the behavior being tested would be in a work setting, and then we need to use that time constraint in the test.

It may be that all authentic assessment is performance-based, but not all performance-based assessment is authentic unless it is designed to be so.

The idea of performance assessment is not new -- it has long been used in the arts, athletics, and even employment and training (the mock job interview is a prime example). What is new is the growing interest among educators and others in using performance-based assessment to better measure a broad range of basic skills, including "higher order" thinking and problem-solving skills and "functional" workplace-related basic skills.

There are a number of different types of performance-based assessment. These include portfolios, open-ended questions, demonstrations, and interviews. What ties the various performance assessment strategies together is the emphasis on providing a more accurate and "authentic" assessment through the actual demonstration of skills. The aim of performance assessment is not only to test what a student knows, but whether the student can use his or her knowledge and skills appropriately. (See the boxes on pages ahead for a description of each approach.)

## **PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES**

Performances, Demonstrations, and Exhibitions. At the heart of performance assessment is the idea of demonstrating or exhibiting mastery - showing what you can do. Performances and demonstrations allow participants to do just that: demonstrate what they have learned. The most familiar form of "performance" for youth practitioners may be the mock job interview or worksite evaluations. A youth's performance at the interview or at the workplace during a set period of time is evaluated according to clearly defined criteria. But demonstrations can also be used to assess a variety of functional basic skills - for example, by requiring students to read an instruction manual and then perform the corresponding activity. This type of exercise allows students to demonstrate their ability to read, comprehend and apply information. As the emphasis on the ability to use basic skills grows, some form of demonstration becomes an essential element in assessment.

Portfolios. Portfolio assessment brings together a number of examples of a student's work as a means of documenting his or her progress or achievement over time in one or more areas. A portfolio might contain a mix of materials such as research notes, drawings, essays and journal entries, and often includes drafts and revisions as well as final "best" pieces. Portfolios are particularly valuable in assessing writing skills, but they could also be used in evaluating a participant's career decision making or job search skills or work readiness. One of the major benefits of the portfolio approach is that it actively involves students in reviewing and making judgements about their own work as they determine the framework for the portfolio, select the contents, and judge its quality. Portfolios also help students and instructors assess the learning process, by demonstrating improvement over time or the differences between draft and final products. As such, portfolios serve two purposes - providing evidence of achievement while also engaging the student in the assessment process.

Group projects....

**Advantages of Performance-Based Assessment.** Performance-based assessment has many strengths to offer youth practitioners, particularly if compared to standardized, norm-referenced, multiple-choice tests:

- » Performance-based assessment examines what a person can do, not simply what a person knows. Performance-based assessment provides an opportunity to examine a person's ability to apply skills in context. When properly designed, performance-based assessments accurately reflect real-life educational and job performance, in contrast to many norm-referenced tests which are administered in isolation and focus on simple, short, written, fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions. (A word of caution, however: performance-based assessments can be as inauthentically designed as traditional tools, and thus can be equally irrelevant.)
- » Performance-based assessment focuses on higher-order thinking skills, skills that have been identified consistently by employers as necessary for today's workplace. For example, they require students to demonstrate judgment and interpretation in addressing a question, skills increasingly necessary even in entry-level jobs.
- » Performance-based assessment places the learner at the center of the assessment process. As noted earlier, testing is too often done **to** learners instead of **with** learners; learners are not informed about the reason for the assessment, results are not shared, and no effort is made to work with the learner to use the assessment results in planning a program. In performance assessment, the learner is an active participant in the assessment process; in many cases, the learner actually designs the specific assessment task with the instructor.
- » Performance-based assessments have the **potential** to be more accurate than norm-referenced tests. If properly developed, performance-based assessments focus more clearly on what a person can do and allow flexibility for various learning styles. For example, norm-referenced tests are generally administered in one standard time period which rewards speed of recall and penalizes slow answering. A person who answers more slowly will receive a lower score. This can lead to inaccurate inferences about a person's ability. In this instance, a low test score does not necessarily imply that a person does not possess the knowledge or skills being tested -- only that s/he works more slowly.
- » Performance-based assessment usually requires some degree of collaboration with peers and supervisors. Performance-based assessment is as much about developing process skills as it is about content. It is important for students to develop their ability to work well in group situation since most adult and workplace challenges will require the capacity to balance individual and group achievement.

**Rethinking the Assessment Process.** Performance assessment offers a number of



important advantages in assessing the kinds of employability skills increasingly required, but it is no more an automatic "solution" to the assessment question than is selection of a specific test. Instead, discussions of performance assessment should help remind us that **the assessment process is more than simply choosing a test**. The "best" test in any given situation depends on what is being taught, which depends on how employability has been defined locally.

Good tests (and mediocre ones as well) can be easily misused. The emphasis must be on what is being measured (i.e., the definition of employability) and how the information will be used (for instructional and/or for compliance purposes). Some examples of how good tests can be misused follow:

- Using a locator or appraisal test (e.g., the TABE locator, the CASAS appraisal, the ABE locator) to monitor progress by using it to measure gains. While these locators are "good" tests, they help meet compliance needs; they do not diagnose where learning begins, nor do they measure progress.
- Using the Job Corps Reading Test as a measure of reading comprehension. Again, it is a good test, but it measures vocabulary more than reading comprehension. Nor should it be used beyond compliance purposes; it does not diagnose where learning begins nor does it measure progress.
- Using the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT-R) to inform instruction and measure progress. While the WRAT-R is a useful tool, the reading portion measures vocabulary as opposed to reading comprehension. While it is a fairly comprehensive measure of math competence, it does not fully assist instructors in planning an instructional approach to attack skill deficiencies.

To assess employability skills appropriately, practitioners need to look at assessment as an ongoing process that examines a variety of skills at a variety of times using a variety of different instruments and methods. The methods of assessment must relate to the skills you want to measure; those skills must have been validated by the labor market; and the information generated must be used in ways that reinforce the learning process.

#### **4. CONNECT ASSESSMENT TO INSTRUCTION AND WORKSITE TRAINING**

Assessment information must be linked to the labor market, the instructional process, and worksite training strategies.

The initial design connection is to the labor market. Assessment strategies and systems should not be developed in a vacuum; they must be based on the labor market, so that they measure relevant labor market skills and so that judgments about an individual's abilities will be made within the context of labor market needs as well as the individual's needs and desires. (This is discussed in Strategy #2, earlier.)

Assessment information must also be linked to instruction, so that the instructional process relates to the individual's proficiencies and deficiencies. This means that:

- » Information must be collected in a way that informs the instructional process. Competency-based (or criterion-referenced) tools and strategies lend themselves readily to the instructional process because those tools and strategies assess specific skills and identify the learner's level of difficulty in mastering the skill.
- » Systems should be designed so that they move relevant assessment information to the instructional setting (classroom or worksite).
- » Teachers/worksite supervisors must be involved as part of the total employability development process.
- » Curriculum-embedded assessments should be created so that the learner perceives them as a learning activity and the teacher uses them as an opportunity to measure and evaluate the learner's abilities.

In sum, this strategy addresses assessing for what you teach and teaching toward what you assess. The first step in making this a reality is to understand what needs to be taught and how it will be taught. Then assessment tools and strategies can be identified and developed which will measure skills that are relevant to the instructional setting.

#### **5. MEASURE COMPETENCE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EMPLOYABILITY READINESS, NOT CLASSROOM LEARNING**

The previous strategies have addressed the philosophy and subprocesses of assessment:

- » how we think about assessment overall;

- » how we identify what the labor market needs as a threshold;
- » how we use that labor market information to select appropriate tools and strategies;
- » why it is necessary to use various types of tools and strategies to make accurate judgments;
- » how we use assessment information to inform and improve the quality of instruction.

This strategy addresses one more subprocess that is necessary in order for the assessment process to be authentic -- how to make learning and assessment both contextual and integrated.

Contextual learning (and assessment) means shifting from traditional school-based learning approaches to ones that use knowledges and skills most often found at work. To paraphrase Lauren Resnick from the University of Pittsburgh, contextual learning focuses on cooperation rather than individual cognition; contextual learning focuses on the use of tools rather than on pure thought; and contextual learning focuses on the manipulation of objects and events rather than on abstract symbols.

Integrated learning involves teaching (and testing) the knowledge of a subject's concepts and principles simultaneously with the application of those concepts and principles. At work, knowledge and skills (i.e., the application of knowledge) are most often practiced together; therefore, both our instructional and our testing mechanisms must find ways to teach and measure them together. The nature of skills differs depending on the context within which they are being applied and the content to which they are being applied.

At the point of mastery certification or final certification of overall competence, it is necessary to assess an individual's ability to use knowledge and skills in job-related settings. This can only happen if we use measurement strategies which take context and integration into account.

## **6. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

As a job training agency begins to define and assess employability, staff development and training become key priorities. Staff training builds staff understanding, involvement, and support for the system: the more staff understand how an employability assessment system can help them and their clients, the more likely they are to use and take seriously the tools and procedures that are available.

On a more technical level, staff training on using the assessment tools is essential to maintaining the validity and reliability of the assessment process, particularly for performance assessment which involves observation and significant professional judgment. However, roles and responsibilities regarding the assessment process will vary among staff positions. A receptionist may have responsibility only for observing and reporting specific behavior and an intake worker will probably collect and record data, while a case manager will be responsible for judging assessment data so as to make appropriate service assignments. The receptionist must be trained to observe, while the case manager must be trained to evaluate.

Practitioners identify several elements as essential to an effective staff training and development process:

- » *Training must be broad-based.* All staff must acquire a broader mix of skills, including technical, vision, and political skills in order to deal with the challenges of implementing a quality assessment system. All levels of staff within the agency must be trained, because the assessment process affects everyone from counselors and trainers to intake workers, planners and managers, subcontractor staff, and worksite supervisors. Perhaps more important, a comprehensive assessment system requires training across agency lines. Joint staff training is a particularly effective means of building bridges among local agencies and ensuring that "ownership" extends to staff throughout the system. Joint staff training also reduces redundancy in information-gathering across institutions; staff will only trust assessment information from other institutions if they feel confident that the staff in those institutions are well qualified -- a direct result of training.
- » *Training and development should be ongoing,* and not just a one-time occurrence. Program staff need time to work their way through the implications of a new system and to respond to problems as they arise. As one practitioner pointed out, "it's not until you start working with the system that you start to see the things you thought you understood, that you don't; to see the nuances you didn't anticipate."
- » *Training must be competency-based.* As with participant training, competency-based staff training offers the advantages of clearly defining the skills that need to be learned, concentrating training on the specific skills that each staff person needs to develop, and emphasizing the ability to use needed skills appropriately as the standard for success.

Finally, a comprehensive staff training and development plan does not stop at formal training (e.g., seminars and workshops). It also includes the development of quality criteria which are used to observe staff as they carry out different tasks and processes. Using quality criteria for staff observation provides an opportunity for immediate and continuous feedback to staff on how to improve their skills.

## **SECTION FOUR**

## **SELF-EVALUATION FOR EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT**

Even when practitioners commit to the assessment principles and use proven strategies in developing, implementing, and operating quality assessment systems, the results are not always as positive as one would hope. To remedy that, we need to understand how to address issues that may inhibit the potential effectiveness of the proven strategies.

Issues that affect the development, implementation, and operation of a comprehensive, integrated assessment system tend to fall into two categories: issues within the direct control of system decision makers, and issues external to the job training system. This is complicated by the fact that the assessment system can be affected by a mix of both technical and political issues, any of which can "come at" the system from internal or external sources.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNAL DECISION MAKERS**

Decision makers' actions and beliefs affect the staff's ability to develop, implement, and operate a quality assessment system. Decision makers determine the time, money, and commitment available to support an assessment system; the decision makers' own philosophy, education, and training are factors as well. If decision makers think of assessment as "just a test," individual staff members will have a hard time championing a more comprehensive strategy.

Decision makers also determine how much time and resources to allocate to assessment. If decision makers do not place a high priority on assessment or lack a strong philosophical base, they may not understand that assessment requires an investment of time and money, just as do curriculum and instruction.

The staff's ability to develop, implement, and operate a comprehensive, integrated assessment system depends on the answers to questions such as these:

- » Do decision makers understand the importance of staff training and do they invest accordingly?
- » Are decision makers flexible and willing to adapt to new and changing information, or do they respond to suggested changes with, "We've always done it this way, so there is no reason to change"?
- » How committed are decision makers to developing an effective assessment system, and how involved are they in the process of implementing and operating one? Do they offer their input?
- » Can they motivate staff despite external obstacles and hassles? Do they refuse

to say, "It can't be done"?

The following matrix can help determine the extent to which decision makers may be acting as obstacles to effective assessment:

**DECISION-MAKERS' ASSESSMENT SYSTEM HINDRANCE MATRIX**

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Philosophy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is just a test</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is an ongoing process</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is ongoing and is linked to all aspects of program design</li> <li>•Every staff member is involved in the assessment process</li> </ul>
<b>Priority</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•We need to do assessment because of regulations</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is important but we need to spend more time on curriculum and instruction</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is critical to quality programming; it drives curriculum and instruction</li> <li>•Key to determining individual service strategy and program systems evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>Commitment/ Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The staff can handle it just fine</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I keep tabs on the situation</li> <li>•Staff send me periodic reports</li> <li>•I get involved if there is a crisis</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I am integrally involved in assessment decisions</li> <li>•At staff meetings, assessment is always a high priority topic of discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Staff Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Staff are trained in how to use assessment forms</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Staff receive orientation to assessment process and philosophy</li> <li>•Other training modules are developed on an as needed basis</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•We have instituted a comprehensive, broad-based staff training plan</li> <li>•Staff development is ongoing</li> <li>•Training is competency-based</li> <li>•Staff development linked to rewards (monetary, promotion, recognition, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Flexibility/ Adaptability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•We've always done it this way</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I am willing to make changes within the context of our current system</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Our system is constantly changing to better meet the needs of the client</li> </ul>
<b>Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment is a separate component</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Our assessment staff interpret data and this information is linked to curriculum and instruction</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessment occurs at every point in process by every staff person from receptionist to counselor</li> <li>•Assessment integrated into all aspects of program design</li> </ul>

## **DECISION-MAKERS' ASSESSMENT HINDRANCE MATRIX RESULTS:**

6-12:

Very High Hindrance Level -- Your assessment system is basically a pre-test upon which to make eligibility decisions and a post-test to document positive terminations. You are not gaining any of the benefits of a comprehensive, integrated assessment system.

13-18:

High to Medium Hindrance Level -- Although you have a philosophy base, for whatever reason (not investing the time or resources, not investing in staff training, being inflexible to change, etc.) you have not taken this philosophy and turned it into action.

19-24:

Medium to Low Hindrance Level -- You have a strong philosophy base and are committed to assessment. You have passed this commitment and philosophy onto your staff. You have instituted many of the important elements of a comprehensive, integrated assessment system; however, there are still barriers and issues you are working through. It is likely that with the necessary commitment, you can go all the way.

25-30:

Very Low Hindrance Level -- You have institutionalized all of the critical elements of a comprehensive, integrated assessment system. You and your staff have turned a strong commitment and philosophy base into action. Assessment is integrated into every aspect of program design, and you are not hindering the process. Congratulations!



## **THE IMPORTANCE OF EXTERNAL FACTORS**

Ensuring support from internal decision makers is only half the battle. External factors, ranging from turf concerns to confidentiality issues, may hinder the assessment implementation process. Factors that affect assessment can be **technical** or **political**. One overall strategy that makes it possible to resolve both technical and political issues is to strengthen the sense of ownership in the assessment system on the part of other youth-serving agencies. This can be addressed through tactics such as interagency task forces, interagency meetings, cross-training, and regular communication to identify and address issues in a timely and mutually acceptable way.

Resolving technical issues will require a thorough understanding of the technicalities involved so as to devise a plan of action that effectively addressed the issue. For example, many programs find it difficult to consolidate information-gathering because of confidentiality laws. To address this problem, the decision maker needs a good working knowledge of the state confidentiality laws so that s/he knows what can and cannot be done in terms of having information follow the client through the system.

The first of the political issues is the **conflict between quality and compliance** that underlies the entire assessment discussion. Pre/post testing at entry and exit is sufficient, if compliance is the only purpose of assessment. However, a quality assessment system that improves instructional quality and provides accountability to the learners for ultimate outcomes requires that assessment be integrated into the classroom and at the worksite. Even once practitioners in the youth employment system are committed to focusing the assessment system on increasing instructional effectiveness (i.e., quality), they may need to convince those in other youth-serving agencies that compliance cannot be allowed to drive the design of the assessment system. A balance needs to be struck between accountability for the **quality** of an assessment system and accountability for **compliance** purposes, and practitioners within the JTPA system need to lead the way in the broader community.

As with any systems change, there is likely to be significant **resistance to change**. Resistance to change may be inevitable, but it can be reduced by taking the time to make sure everyone is on board, and encouraging sharing and input into the development of the system. The time, hard work, headaches, and hassles of instituting a comprehensive, integrated, quality assessment system make everyone's job harder. But, if everyone understands how assessment can improve program outcomes and make their own work more productive, and if they are involved in developing the system, a sense of ownership will help reduce anxiety about systems change.

Another implementation issue at the political level is the challenge of **integrating assessment into program design**. Because integration requires people to change the way they do their work and the way they think, the need to integrate assessment into program design is inevitably problematic until all staff members have been trained in assessment and until assessment has permeated every point of the youth employment process. **Practitioners need to think about how the young client's assessed needs drive every program design decision.** Assessment should be a central factor in decisions about changes in curriculum, instruction, or other program design issues, and vice versa. How should assessment results influence program design? Will program design changes require modifications to the assessment system? The solution is to educate both staff and decision makers so everyone involves

feels a sense of ownership of the system and are willing to undertake the advocacy and hard work necessary to implement it.

Like resistance to change within organizations, practitioners are likely to face **turf concerns** both within and across agencies. Practitioners need to develop a working environment that encourages open communication and sharing within and across agencies. This can be achieved through cross-departmental meetings and cross-functional problem-solving teams, in which staff can build relationships and learn how different departments fit together to make the assessment process possible. Decision makers need to take the lead role in cross-agency collaboration by negotiating stronger relationships with their peers in other agencies. Inter-agency meetings or teams, as well as intensive education and information-sharing, are also effective techniques.

Among the technical issues that hinder implementation, **resource constraints** are always pivotal. Policymakers need to decide how to balance enhanced or expanded assessment against available resources. This will likely involve building on what is already in place, reallocating resources, pooling resources, and/or seeking additional resources.

**Time constraints** are related to resource constraints. If decision makers are misinformed about how much time assessment requires or are insensitive to conflicting demands on staff time, they may fail to allocate enough time to the assessment function. This problem requires open and extensive communication between decision makers and staff about how to structure a realistic timetable and what kinds of compromises are acceptable.

**Confidentiality** may be a difficult or even an impossible snag. Confidentiality rules, which differ by jurisdiction, affect the circumstances in which a participant's records may be accessed. Confidentiality concerns may cause wasteful duplication of information collection. Decision makers and staff need to clearly understand the relevant confidentiality issues and work on an inter-agency basis to develop practical strategies.

**Legal issues** need always to be kept in mind. The assessment process in job training programs is not exempt from the general litigiousness of American society. However, for the most part, new legal concerns are merely a stronger incentive to utilize assessment in an ethical way.

For example, it's the right thing to do to administer tests in such a way that they accurately reflect the abilities of people with disabilities. Now, the Americans with Disabilities Act has codified that ethical framework in legislation, specifying that if a test is used in an employment setting, it cannot be used to screen out persons with disabilities unless the criteria used to develop the test are the same as those required to perform the job and are consistent with business necessity (Section 102(b)(6) of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990).

Likewise, using race-normed assessments is not the right thing to do; now, for example, programs are specifically prohibited from race-norming the GATB (General Aptitude Test Battery).

The most far-reaching legal consideration involves the liability for assessment, and again this is a back-up for an ethical framework for assessment. One of the component subprocesses of assessment is making judgments, and these judgments have consequences. However, there is a fairly certain way to limit program liability for assessment decisions: assessment should not be used to sort people **out** of services, but rather to identify what specific services they need. Process and intent are of critical importance here: first, was the decision making process a consensual one (i.e., did the youth agree with the consequence assigned as a result of the assessment judgment?); and second, was the intent to broaden rather than narrow the youth's ultimate employment options?

There are a lot of new legal considerations that can create legal problems related to assessment. The best defense against legal problems is understanding the relevant legal issues and implementing the assessment system within an ethical framework.

## SECTION FIVE MANAGING FOR QUALITY IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

To improve the quality of results, the quality of the processes that yield those results have to be improved. Although this seems a simple enough concept, the private sector has been exploring its implications for the past several years.

In a recent survey, for the first time, businesses in the United States ranked quality, not profits, as their top goal. In developing quality, businesses are adhering to a management philosophy known as Total Quality Management, initially developed by Edward Deming.

Fifty-seven percent of American companies have Total Quality Management as a strategic goal or policy, according to a recent American Society for Training and Development survey, and the remaining 43 percent anticipate adopting Total Quality Management within the next one to three years. Since the public sector job training system is totally dependent upon private sector placements for its ultimate success, public sector agencies would be well advised to join private companies in ensuring a focus on quality.

Making quality the number one goal for the public sector will require a dramatic change on the part of agency leadership as well as an examination of external environments which impose certain inflexible processes and practices on local organizations. The recent emphasis on increased accountability, especially within JTPA, has created an intense focus on "compliance." A "managing for quality" philosophy requires that quality not be compromised to compliance.

"Managing for quality" means attempting to change an organization's culture by managing people's efforts rather than managing people. It means changing the way people do things by focusing on process improvements.<sup>6</sup> However, managing for quality is more than simply identifying an organization's processes, establishing teams to develop improvement strategies, and controlling the variations.

Managing for quality requires visionary leadership and a belief system that surrounds, encompasses and permeates discreet activities, teamwork and process evaluations. In short, managing for quality is hard work, it requires day-to-day involvement of leaders, and it is never "over." Instead, it is an ongoing way of thinking, doing, and believing. Managing for quality can help practitioners and policymakers alike shift the paradigm for assessment, as called for earlier in this **Guide**.

This chapter is not intended to serve as a comprehensive guide to implementing a "managing for quality" system. Rather, it takes some of the principles of the private sector's Total Quality Management philosophy and explores how to apply them to managing for quality in one process -- employability assessment for at-risk youth.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF MANAGING FOR QUALITY**

The basic tenets of A "managing for quality" philosophy can help set the context for a discussion on improving the quality of the assessment process. Some employment and training agencies have begun managing for quality over the past few years, largely under the direction of the Center for Remediation Design and the Center for Human Resources. Their experiences have proven that it is important to understand and commit to a set of principles, strategies, and tools before undertaking a managing for quality approach.

Much has been written about Total Quality Management, with each author setting his or her own basic framework. Major sources for the "managing for quality" framework presented here are all of Edward Deming's work; **Implementing Total Quality Management: An Overview**, by Joseph R. Jablonski; and **The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization**, by Peter Senge.

Six principles that define the fundamental values of Total Quality Management are essential for managing for quality in public sector organizations:

1. **A focus on the customer** (in our case, the "customer" is **at-risk youth**);
2. **A focus on the process as well as the results** (the assessment process and outcomes);
3. **A focus on prevention over inspection** (information collection and evaluation on an on-going basis rather than at a single point in time; e.g., analyzing what went wrong when a youth drops out and changing the program to prevent that outcome from reoccurring);
4. **Mobilizing the expertise of the workforce** (line staff are given authority and responsibility to identify the criteria against which a process will be evaluated for quality and are empowered to change the process based on study);
5. **Fact-based versus assumption-based decision-making** (processes are changed based on facts collected against criteria rather than based on whim or gut feelings);
6. **Feedback** (regular recognition of accomplishment, on-going examination of progress toward mutual goals for both customers and workers).

In order to act on the above principles, strategies have to be identified and then implemented. Strategies that are central to implementing a "managing for quality" philosophy include:

- » **Participatory management** -- at all levels, from line worker to agency director. It evolves over time and is based on trust and feedback.

- » Continuous process improvement -- with the goal of defining quality and never allowing for variations or defects. Continuous process improvement demands constant improvements versus occasional reviews.
- » Teams -- established as cross-functional, both vertically and horizontally. Teams are responsible for understanding a particular process, establishing process controls, making decisions, and implementing improvements.

Some of the tools for implementing a "managing for quality" philosophy include:

- » Brainstorming skills
- » Facilitation skills
- » Group dynamic/team member skills
- » Process control (identification of process flow and process variation)
- » Staff training

### **MANAGING FOR QUALITY IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

While your organization may not be changing its philosophical approach to overall management overnight, the basic principles, strategies, and tools presented here can be used to improve the quality of any given process and/or subprocess.

While Total Quality Management was developed in the private sector and most case studies involve manufacturing, the service sector and particularly the public service sector have many processes which can be examined through a "managing for quality" lens, including:

- » the employability development process;
- » the assessment process;
- » the orientation/eligibility/intake process; and
- » the basic skills instructional process.

Clearly, many of these processes overlap. The key is which one is the focus of improvement -- the others may become subprocesses to the process under study, as it may become a subprocess to

another.

The question before us is:

How can our assessment process be examined for quality so as to improve the quality of the process as part of improving the quality of the results?

It is important to define three terms as we begin this discussion:

- Process -- A series of operations or activities linked together to provide a result that has increased value.
- Quality -- Those attributes of a product or service to which the customer (in our case, at-risk youth) attaches value.
- Criterion -- A standard, rule, or test on which a judgment can be based.

Let's expand on each "managing for quality" principle, and examine it through the window of the assessment process. As discussed in Section Three, assessment can be broken down into four subprocesses: collecting information, evaluating information, judging information, and assigning consequences based on the information. These subprocesses are each overlaid on the principles and criteria which follow.

#### Principle #1. Maintain a Focus on the Customer.

Customers must be asked regularly what they want and what they value about what the service is or should be. But first, the customer has to be identified. In the employment and training context, is the primary customer of the assessment process the state, the client, employers, other agencies, etc? ~~From our perspective, the primary customer is the individual youth participant.~~ As such, they are the ones who define quality; consequently, all decision-making must be youth-centered. By focusing on the individual youth, we guarantee that we are designing and delivering services that focus on where that individual youth is on the continuum toward employability.

Identifying the primary customer is a key exercise because too many businesses articulate one customer but set up their practices to respond to a totally different customer. For example, they say the customer is the buyer, yet they but set up practices which respond to the supplier.

Understanding the characteristics of the primary customer is another important exercise. Employment and training systems cannot respond to the needs and wants of at-risk youth unless they have a solid understanding of the characteristics of today's at-risk youth, as discussed in Section One earlier.

Employment and training systems provide many examples of this mismatch as well. For example, when

asked directly, programs often identify at-risk youth as their primary customer; however, if the assessment systems focus on compliance, that is an indication that the real, or hidden, customer is the funding agency. This example illustrates the concern for balancing accountability for the quality of an assessment system and accountability for compliance purposes.

**What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure that a youth focus is maintained?**

Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- The characteristics of at-risk youth are well understood.
- Assessment results are valued by these youth.
- Assessment results produce a quality and quantity of ideas for action.
- The quality of staff judgments is validated with the client.
- Staff allow the client to make choices from multiple options.
- Staff provide flexibility in the process to meet ongoing individual needs.

Principle #2. Focus On The Process As Well As The Results.

Managing for quality is a zero-defects philosophy. Quality is continuously improved regardless of how high the quality may be. Customers' unmet expectations of a product or service serve as indicators that something is wrong with the process that produced them. Continuous improvements require a structured approach to problem-solving.

**What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure a focus on the process as well as the results?**

Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- There are a variety of tools, techniques, and strategies to collect information (measure) about the youth's level of employability.
- Information that is constantly collected, constantly evaluated, and constantly judged is recorded as part of the progress record.
- All staff who interact regularly with the youth meet as a team regularly.
- Observations of youth behavior are recorded by all staff using established criteria.
- Information follows youth among all agencies over time.
- Workers ask youth regularly about what they expect from the process.



### Principle #3. Emphasize Prevention, Not Inspection.

Managing for quality moves us away from the notion of "inspecting quality in." The inspection (a manufacturing term which can translate to the public systems monitoring for compliance function) means examining the product or service at the end, after resources have been spent, for defects and variation. Once defects are found, the general response is to provide more inspectors at progress points along the way. Adherence to this principle means constant evaluation of the process so as to improve it, not more inspections along the same process.

**What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure a focus on prevention rather than on inspection for its own sake?**

Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- Youth are asked regularly about what they thought of the services they received.
- Information about individual young people is collected and evaluated on an ongoing and regular basis.
- Measurement strategies are developed using labor market criteria.

### Principle #4. Mobilize the Expertise of the Workforce.

This means increasing the level of employee involvement in problem identification, solution development, decision making on what solutions will work best, and implementation. This principle, probably more than any other, requires the greatest change among and between managers and workers. Workers can no longer come up with ideas and then go to management so that management can unilaterally say, "this is a good one, this is a bad one." Rather, workers through teams have the power to implement their ideas. The organizational culture permits testing of ideas, worker responsibility, and decision making.

**What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure that the expertise of the workforce is being mobilized?**

Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- All staff involved with youth meet regularly as a team\* to evaluate new assessment information and to validate/revise/change judgments and consequences.
- Decision making about the youth is controlled by the team and the youth.

- The organization has a strong commitment to staff training.

\* The team identified here is a youth (client) team (made up of the youth and the staff involved with that specific youth's plan) not necessarily a staff process team (a team specifically set up to deal with the assessment process). If the whole organization were developing a "managing for quality" vision, an assessment process team would also be in place as well (with members of youth teams) whose function was to study the total process and make continuous improvements.

### Principle #5. Make Decisions Based on Facts.

Managing for quality means developing a structured approach to problem-solving. Understanding defects in the service and variations in the process and brainstorming solutions sets an environment for always creating opportunities for improvement rather than opportunities for "got ya." Commitment to a "managing for quality" philosophy means creating mechanisms which collect and record factual data about the process upon which decisions for improvement are based.

#### **What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure that decisions are based on fact?**

##### Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- Interpretation of the assessment results are specified in relation to the youth's employment goal, not in relation to the goal of program activities.
- Measurement strategies are varied and include authentic performance-based assessments.
- Youth are observed against certain behavior criteria from the time they walk in the door (like being on time, oral interaction) to provide more information to evaluate when making an initial judgment.

### Principle #6. Seek Feedback.

This is the linchpin of managing for quality. Feedback can be provided in many forms: team members continuously communicate about the process improvements; flow charts of the process and the deviations can be established/analyzed; individual workers gain feedback in reference to a set of criteria and technical assistance is immediately provided.

#### **What standards could be specified and then observed to ensure continuous feedback?**

##### Potential Criteria for Assessment Process:

- Youth receive regular and ongoing feedback on assessment information collection.

- Youth participate in evaluating the information and forming judgments.
- Staff regularly ask youth for feedback on the process.

As you may have noted, many of the criteria overlap, helping to define quality for more than one of the principles. These criteria, or those that you develop, should be consolidated into one set of quality criteria. The quality criteria set the standard for how quality for this process is defined.

### **WHY DEFINE QUALITY?**

The preceding section was used to discuss each of the "managing for quality" principles and to identify standards which can help apply each principle on a practical level. Fundamental beliefs can be believed but not practiced. Establishing criteria helps us "watch" a belief system in action. Criteria assist process designers in evaluating how the

beliefs are being exercised. Criteria help address any dissonance between what we say we believe as fundamental to how we design and manage systems and what we actively do.

Remember the question before us:

**How can our assessment process be examined for quality so as to improve the quality of the process as part of improving the quality of the results?**

To study the current process, to make improvements, and to develop a strategy for continuous improvements, a set of criteria must be established against which to compare. We are proposing establishing "quality criteria" using the "managing for quality" principles to inform the content of the criteria.

Clearly, criteria can be established using other contexts. Our main focus is that one must have a standard against which to judge something (just as with individual assessment where the labor market requirements set the standard for evaluating minimum proficiency levels). And managing for quality provides a customer-centered (youth-centered) orientation to establishing criteria. Establishing criteria in this way assists in carrying out all the "managing for quality" principles within an isolated process even though the entire organization may not be consciously managing for quality. Finally, establishing standards assists in implementing a continuous improvement strategy for one process or many processes.

### **HOW TO USE QUALITY CRITERIA TO MAKE IMPROVEMENTS**

The development of quality criteria for key service functions is a tool which helps support several of the principles. Quality criteria assists in staying focused on the customer by defining the criteria from the customer's perspective. The organization must always be asking, "What is it the customer values about this process?"

Quality criteria are process-oriented. The criteria are established to facilitate critical observation of the process. Quality criteria help identify problems and help develop process teams to solve the problems and prevent their reoccurrence. Used appropriately, quality criteria trigger the development of teams of workers to solve problems from the bottom up, rather than relying solely on management to make decisions from the top down.

Establishing criteria which define the quality practices within a certain process assists in ultimately evaluating that process based on facts, not assumptions.

Finally, as one of many "managing for quality" practices, the use of quality criteria serves as a technical assistance and training tool. Quality criteria provide ongoing feedback, technical assistance, and training to staff on a regular and ongoing basis.

Developing quality criteria to upgrade practitioner skills and to continuously improve the assessment process is not a simple task. It is an evolutionary process of trust and feedback which develops over time, rather like the productive relationship we try to foster between youth and staff in our programs. It is not an inspection. If quality criteria are used in performance reviews, staff have to believe that the criteria are used to improve overall practice and to determine what types of professional development investments are needed, rather than to determine raises or hiring and firing decisions. (Again, like youth, staff need to believe in the value and use of assessment information.)

Directors have to understand that continuous process improvement means often accepting a small, incremental gain as a step in the right direction toward total quality. The theory is that substantial gains can be achieved through the accumulation of many small improvements which cause a synergy that yields tremendous gains over the long term.

Quality criteria can be used in three fundamental ways to make continuous process improvements:

1. An organization establishes a process team responsible for assessment. One function of the team is to make a fact-based decision about the quality of the current process. To do this, a team member observes the process under study (assessment) for a period of 6-12 months, conducting weekly observations of many staff involved in any part of the process. Over time, the team identifies trends (from "good" to "needs improvement") which establishes the need for changes to the subprocesses, the need for worker training, or both.
2. The quality criteria are used to provide immediate feedback to the worker being

observed, critiquing the process and making suggestion on how to improve. This feedback mechanism is established in an ongoing way, i.e. team member observations of the process do not cease when improvements have been made, since improvements will always be being made.

3. Individual workers become observers of their own process. The quality criteria are used as a tool for self-evaluation (a key "managing for quality" skill). Every staff person involved in the most minuscule part of the process has the quality criteria. Each and every time workers conduct their part of the assessment process, they review themselves against the quality criteria, conducting a self-appraisal. They then improve the way they do their part of the assessment process the very next time they engage in it.

Will employment and training organizations that adopt a "managing for quality" philosophy for their assessment systems and for other operational elements save money as a result? Will a commitment to continuous process improvement through the use of quality criteria prepare more young people for employment at lower cost? This remains to be seen.

Logically, the concept of **managing for quality** should result in cost savings as errors are reduced and innovations identified and introduced. What we do know from the private sector's experience with Total Quality Management is that worker satisfaction increases, the product or outcome improves, and the quality of the ideas workers generate about the product is better. Applying this to employment and training leads us to expect that managing for quality in that setting will improve the system's outcomes -- specifically, more youth will be more ready for work once they come through the system.

## **SUMMARY**

The quality criteria, in essence, define quality as what the customer values. They articulate what you are striving to become vs. as much as you think you can do. This process sets a standard toward which you are always improving.

Managing for quality is about a structured approach to problem-solving. This is the first step in developing a structured approach to: knowing what you want to improve; evaluating current practice against quality practice; brainstorming potential solutions to improve quality; implementing improvements; studying and evaluating; brainstorming; implementing; studying and evaluating; etc.

Finally, the use of quality criteria provides a structure for continuous improvements. Managing for quality requires that improvement be a daily exercise, not a quarterly or annual activity.

## NOTES

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