

# Keys to Successful Private Sector Job Placement & Development: Think PEACE!

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The past 24 months have been brutal for Michigan's economy and its workforce. With unemployment percentages in double digits, competition for jobs has become akin to winning the World Series! Job application after job application, rejection and dejection, until finally an interview, only to lose in the bottom of the ninth to a candidate with more education and training (i.e. a home run)! And in the case of workers' compensation, not only are our clients competing for jobs in the open market, but more than likely they're doing so with the addition of lingering medical restrictions due to injury. This poses an additional variable when performing a job search.

To navigate the uncertain waters of rehabilitation, many parties turn to vocational counselors for guidance and support. These professionals join their customers in one of the most difficult economies in Michigan's history in hopes of assisting them with securing meaningful work at a wage as close to the client's previous pay as possible. It can be a daunting task even in a good economy depending on the case scenario. However, some counselors are finding success despite these barriers, and we wanted to identify those factors that counselors feel are essential to good job development and placement activity.

A survey was developed to identify those factors that enhance job development and placement of injured workers within the state of Michigan. The survey was sent to 158 respondents, with a 25% return. 51% of those who completed the survey have been in the rehabilitation field for more than 20 years, and over 80% indicated membership in a professional association. The survey analyzed vocational rehabilitation counselors' experiences with placement in the state of Michigan, ranking specific services and tools that define the most effective pathways towards successful employment. The survey was completed in August 2009 when the Michigan unemployment rate hovered at 15%, a 6.7% increase over the same time period a year prior.

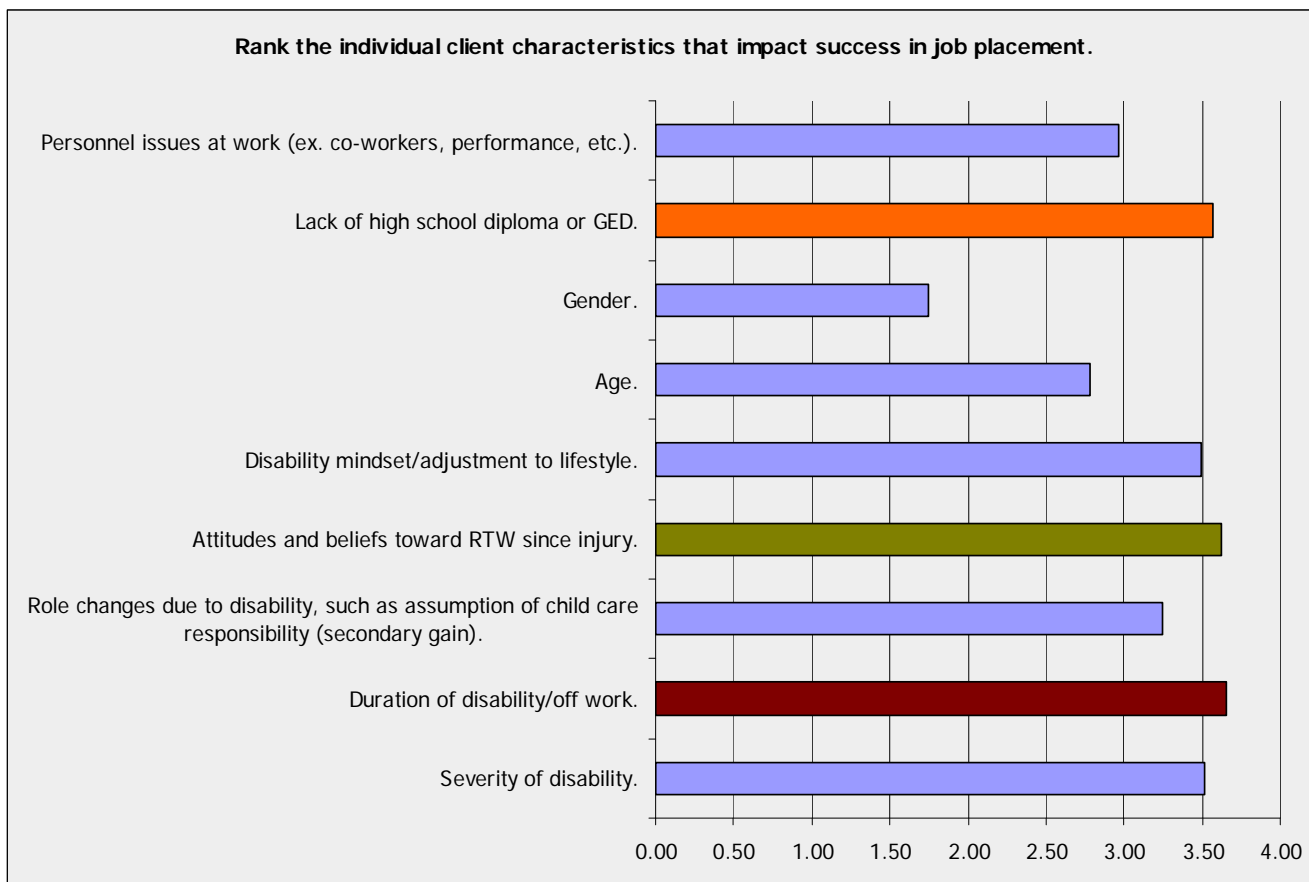
Overall, a total of 89% of the respondents rated **placement opportunity** as "Poor" or "Very Poor" in Michigan. Identified impediments to success included the poor economy, client's duration of disability, employer perceptions of injured workers, client's education level, attitudes and beliefs toward Return-To-Work, and the time delay in referral of clients to vocational rehabilitation services. Although placement is difficult, respondents seemed to indicate an even greater necessity for good, old-fashioned job development! In fact, 86% of surveyed participants found the following statement to be true: "Quality job development in today's economy is imperative for assisting clients in gaining an edge."

Although the above factors underline the challenges in placement, the survey highlights possible resources and activities that can both enhance and secure a plan for success. Overall we think you will find that there are no "silver bullet" approaches, or "new age" tactics that will revolutionize the job development and placement process. We think what you will find is a validation of tried-and-true techniques that almost always can enhance success, but that sometimes get pushed to the side in our busy schedules. One might read the results of the survey and suggest a "back to the basics" approach to job development. Examples of these basic principles highlighted in the results are such things as: Individual client counseling (i.e., client preparation); On-The-Job training opportunities; facilitation of short-term retraining; maximizing personal networks; and face-

to-face contact with employers. Again, these are not new or “sexy” techniques, but they work if given the proper time and attention. Using the age-old Chinese proverb, “Give a person a fish and they’ll eat for a day; Teach a person to fish and they’ll eat for a lifetime” as inspiration, the authors hypothesize that giving a client the tools and techniques to manage their own job development process can have high impact on successful vocational outcomes. We believe the survey results support this hypothesis.

## SURVEY RESULTS

Identifying and analyzing specific client characteristics early in the process, such as through a comprehensive vocational evaluation, can enhance the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services and potentially increase return to work results. The following are some of the indicators that can help the counselor target specific actions within the rehabilitation plan in order to achieve success.

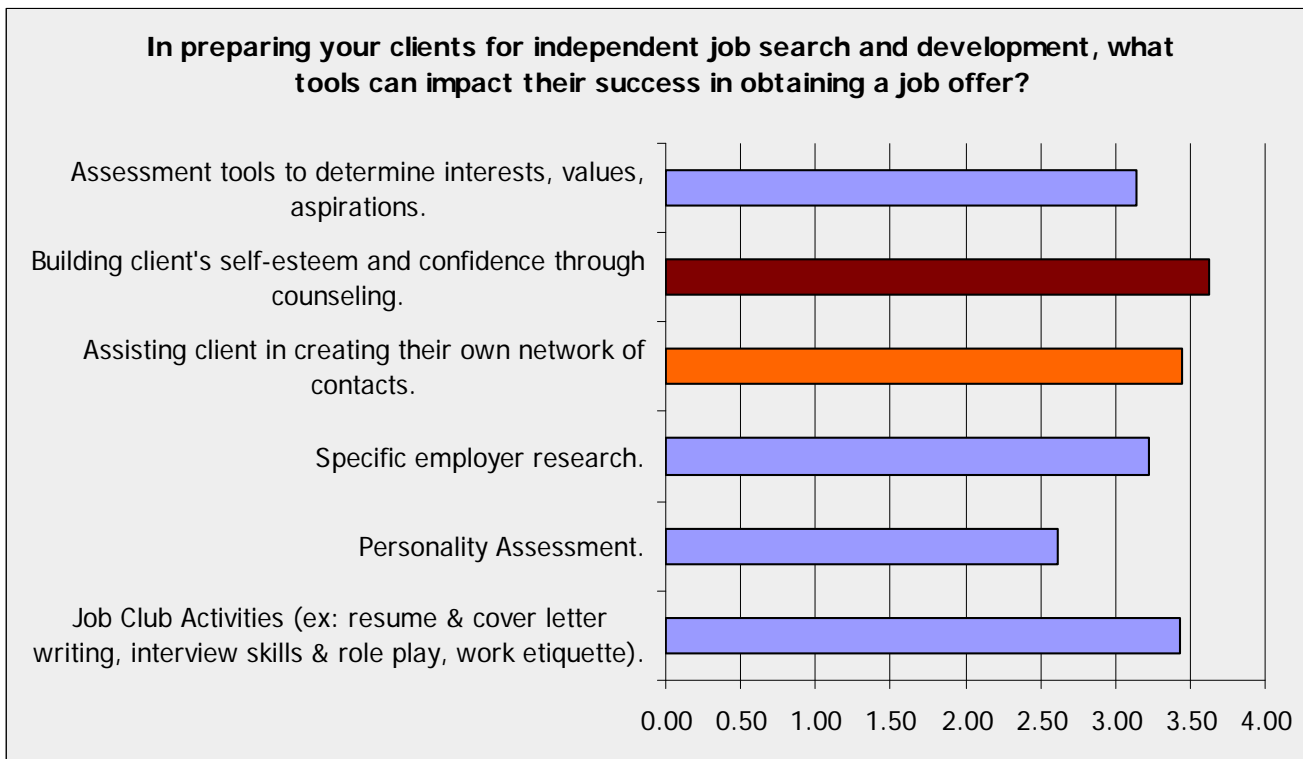


Respondents ranked **duration of disability/Off work** as the factor that most impacts whether or not successful placement is achieved. In fact, 73% felt that **Duration** had “High Impact” on job placement success, meaning that the longer an employee is off work, the harder it is to return them to the workforce. Many experts view the return-to-work “window” as a bell curve, with the optimal lost time duration of 6 weeks or less. After 6 weeks, the back side of the bell curve begins to drop dramatically as the injured employee begins to acclimate to the situation physically, emotionally, and financially. **Attitudes and beliefs toward RTW since injury** is another highly ranked category, with 65% giving it the “High Impact” classification. Based on these results, coupled with the findings of previous research, one could easily speculate that duration of time off and beliefs toward return-to-work are indeed correlated to a great extent. Finally, it should be no

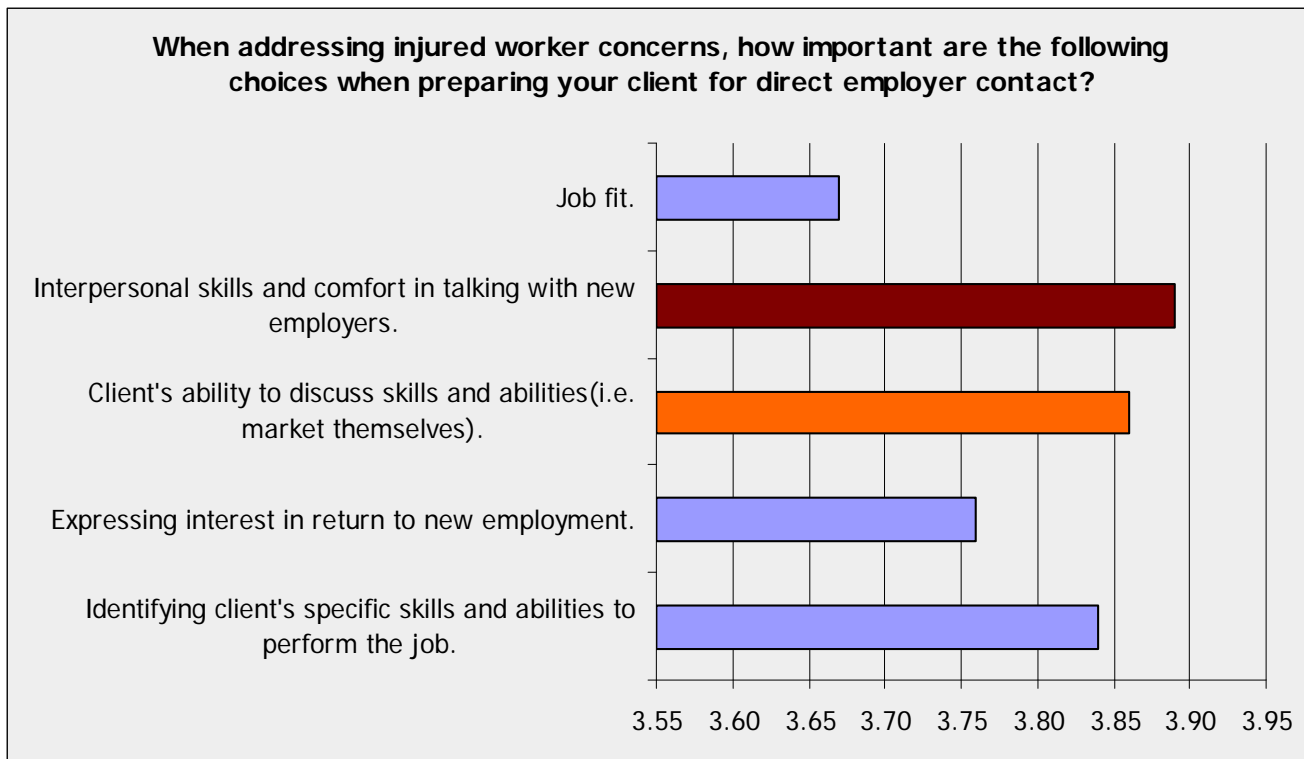
surprise that 68% of respondents identified **lack of high school diploma or GED** as highly impactful given the extreme competition for jobs today.

Throughout the survey, the impact of **client preparation** on placement success is explored using several related questions. Time is of the essence (or “Time is Money”) within workers’ compensation rehabilitation, and the pressure is on the counselors to evaluate and place injured employees as quickly as possible. It is logical then that preparing clients for job search and placement, including the application of individual counseling services, might tend to be minimized in order to save time. We believe the following responses indicate the importance counselors place on client preparation, and a definite desire to spend time on developing these tools and techniques with their clients to ultimately allow for more client self-advocacy in the job development and placement process. One could also theorize that by decreasing fundamental aspects of vocational services such as counseling and client preparation to save time, counselors might actually be increasing the service time and decreasing placement success.

In the graph below, respondents support the fact that counseling is a fundamental component to **building client confidence and self-esteem**, which in turn are critical components to **assisting clients with developing new employer contacts**, also a high scoring category.



Hand-in-hand with enhancing self-esteem is assisting clients with enhancing interpersonal skills, again with the goal of providing more autonomy to the client for direct employer contact. Client preparation for this contact is critical, as they must be able to address their skills, abilities, goals, and possibly their disability/injury when job seeking and interviewing with employers. **Interpersonal skills and comfort in talking with new employers** achieved a ranking of 3.89 out of 4.00 in terms of importance, followed closely by **Client’s ability to discuss skills and abilities**, which scored 3.86.

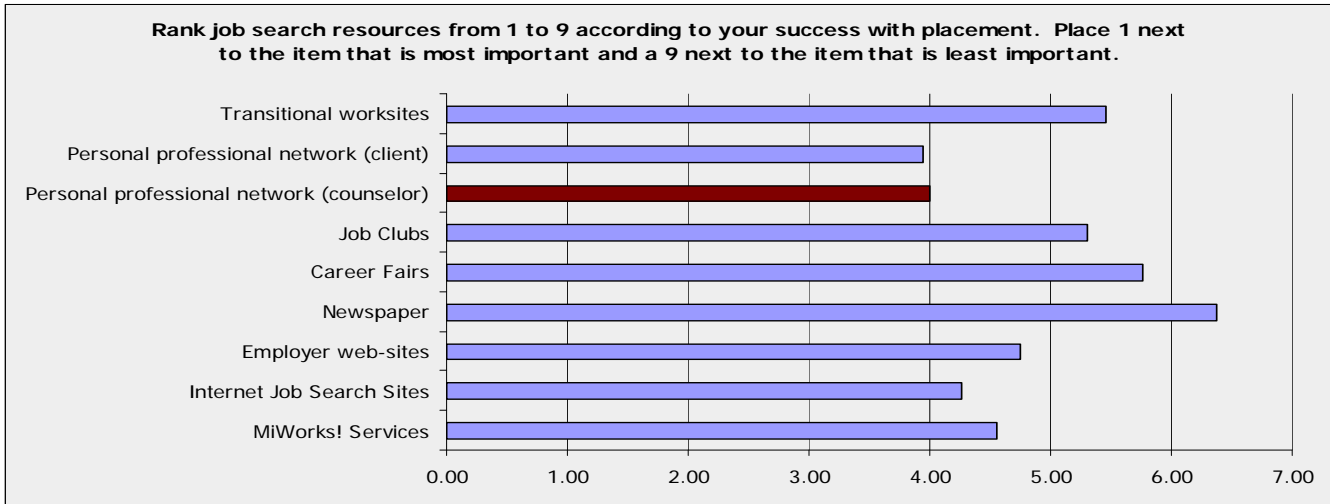


Dictionary.com describes the activity of “networking” as this: *to cultivate people who can be helpful to one professionally, esp. in finding employment or moving to a higher position.* There is no question that a percentage of jobs in the market are unpublicized at any given moment. However, given the right candidate knocking on the right door at the right time, an employer could quickly fill the position saving time and money. This is networking, and it is the personal touch in the job development process that can set your clients apart from most other applicants.

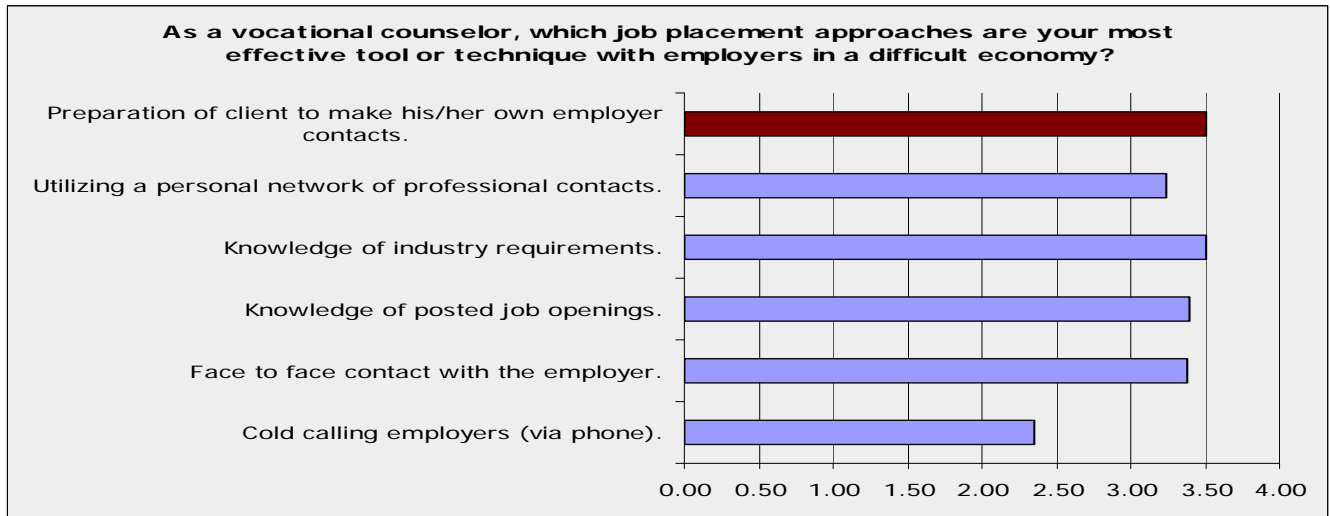
The surveyors hypothesized that utilizing both the client’s and counselor’s personal networks would rank highly important for most respondents. The impact of personal or professional networks on job placement success is identified in three separate survey questions:

- 🚩 **Ranking job search resources (graph 1)** – 42% of the respondents identified counselor networks as being the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> most important resource for placement; 46% ranked client networks as an even more important resource.
- 🚩 **Placement approaches that prove to be effective (graph 2)** – 62% of the respondents ranked preparation of client to make his/her own employer contacts as Highly Effective. Of special note in this graph, counselors ranked cold calling as one of the least effective approaches.
- 🚩 **Preparation of clients for an independent job search (graph 3)** – 94% of the respondents indicated that assisting the client in the creation of their own network of contacts had “Moderate” to “High Impact” on obtaining job offers.

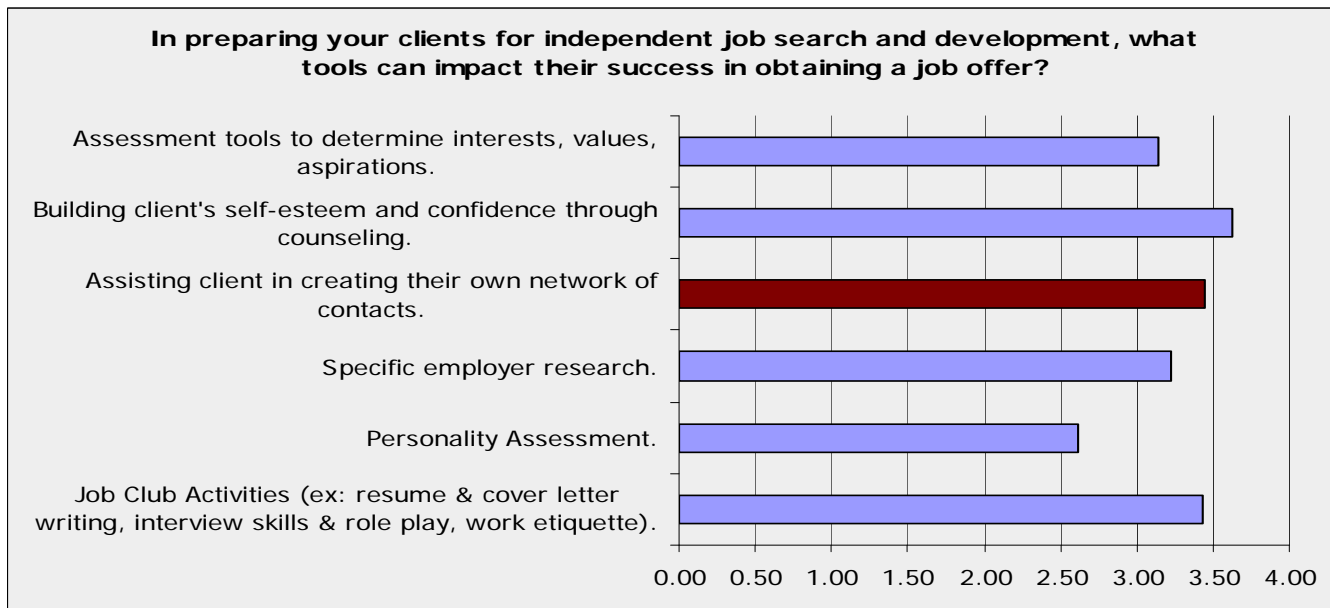
Graph 1



Graph 2

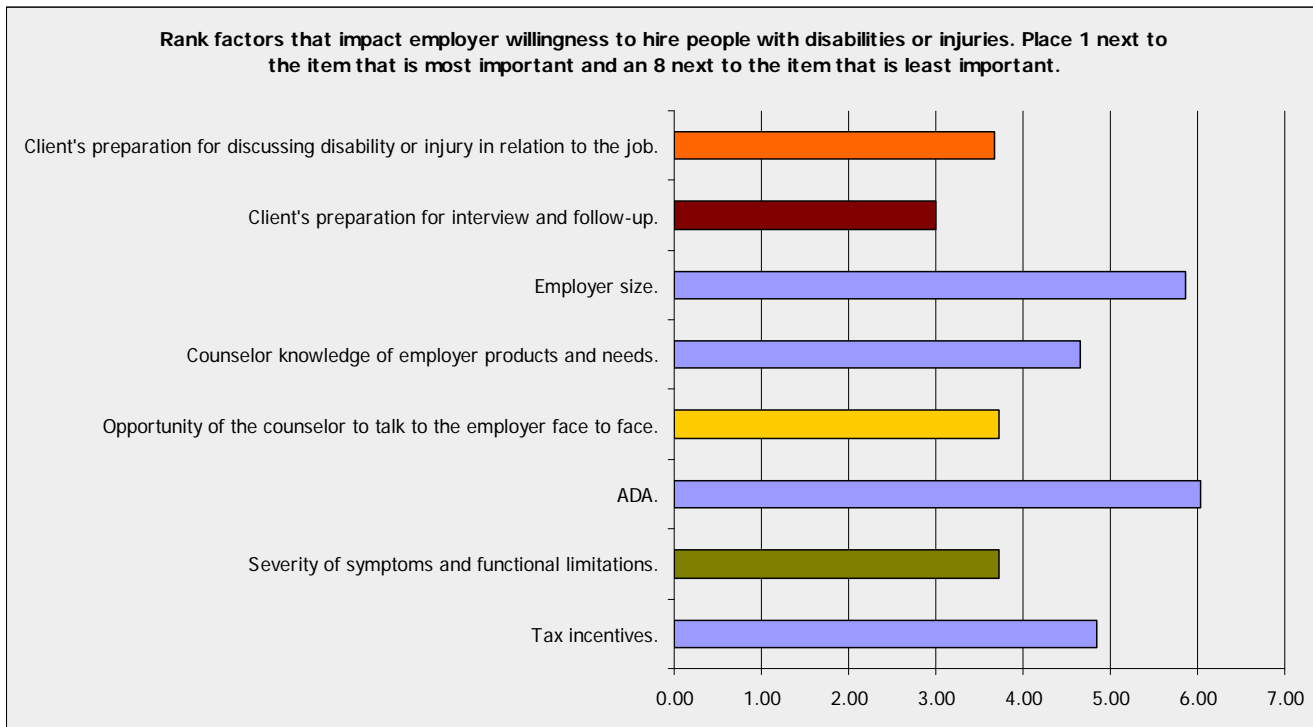


Graph 3



Throughout the survey, enhancing client preparation and independence is noted to be highly effective in achieving positive outcomes. Client autonomy and the benefit of individual counseling are indicative of successful placement based on the responses below.

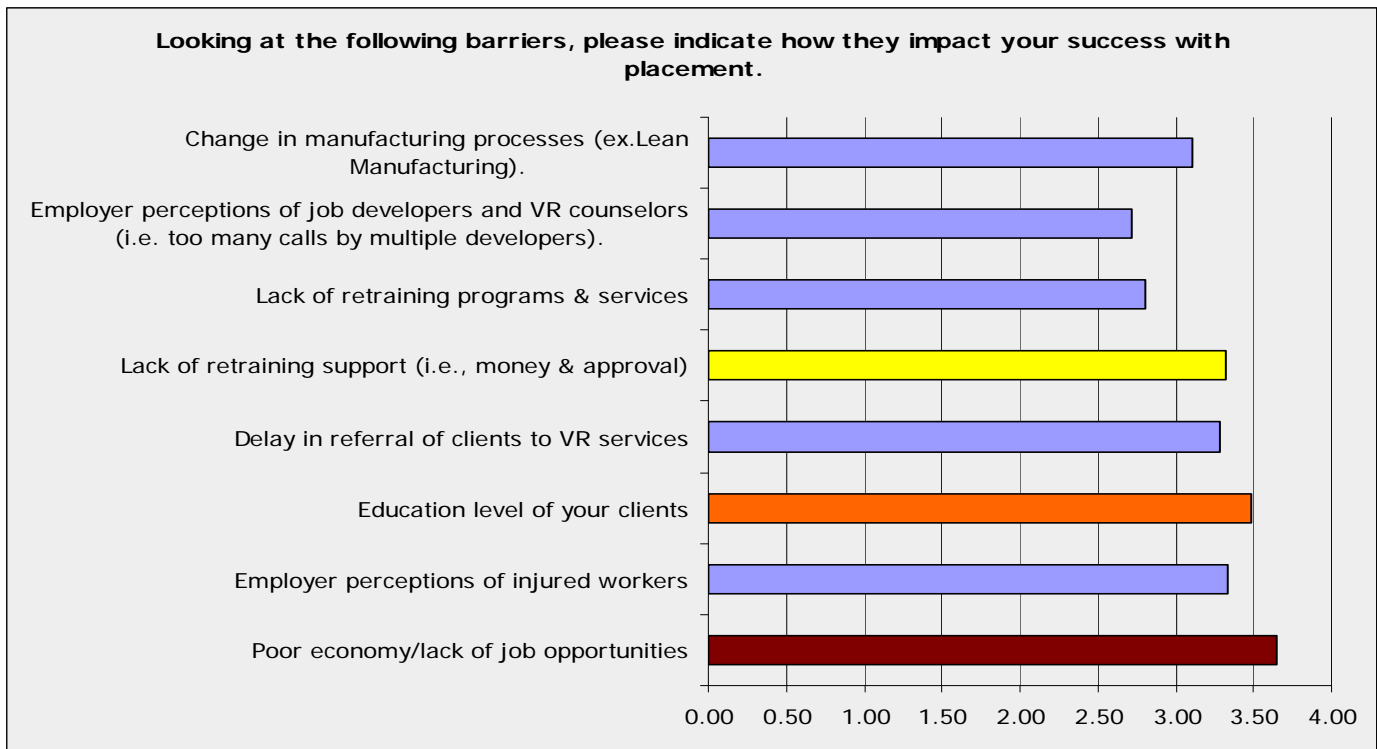
With so much competition in the job market, the survey asked participants to put themselves in the role of a business owner and rank factors that might impact their hiring of a person with an injury and/or disability. Interestingly, respondents ranked both **Client's preparation for interview and follow-up** and **Client's preparation for discussing disability or injury** of the highest importance. Obviously the **severity of the injury or disability** can impact success depending on the employer, but **face-to-face contact** with employers was again highlighted as very impactful on success.



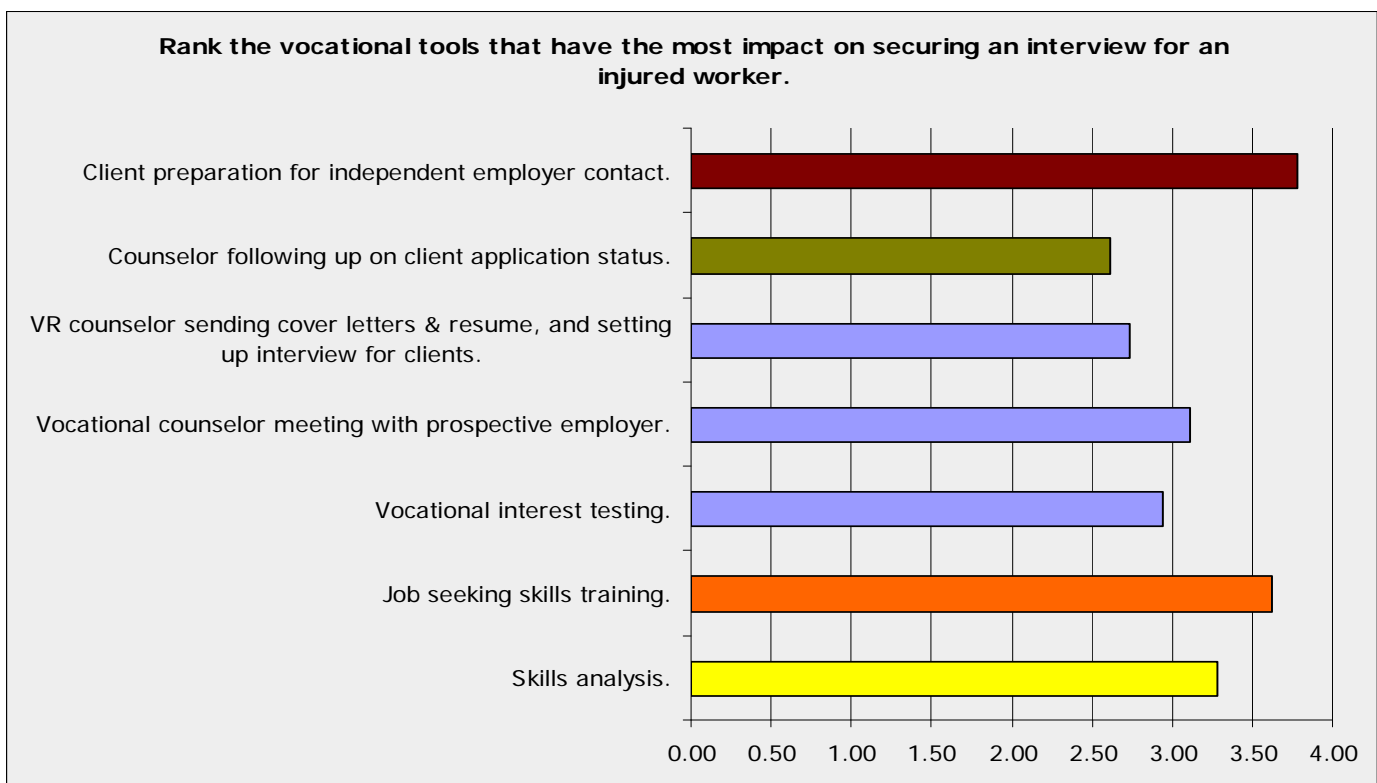
The survey also explores barriers to placement. In Michigan today, it is no surprise that the **poor economy** is seen as highly impactful on placement success (see below). However, vocational counselors highlight two other specific areas related to training and education as also having a high impact on success:

1. Overall education level of the client at the time of referral
2. Lack of retraining support from payers (i.e., money & approval)

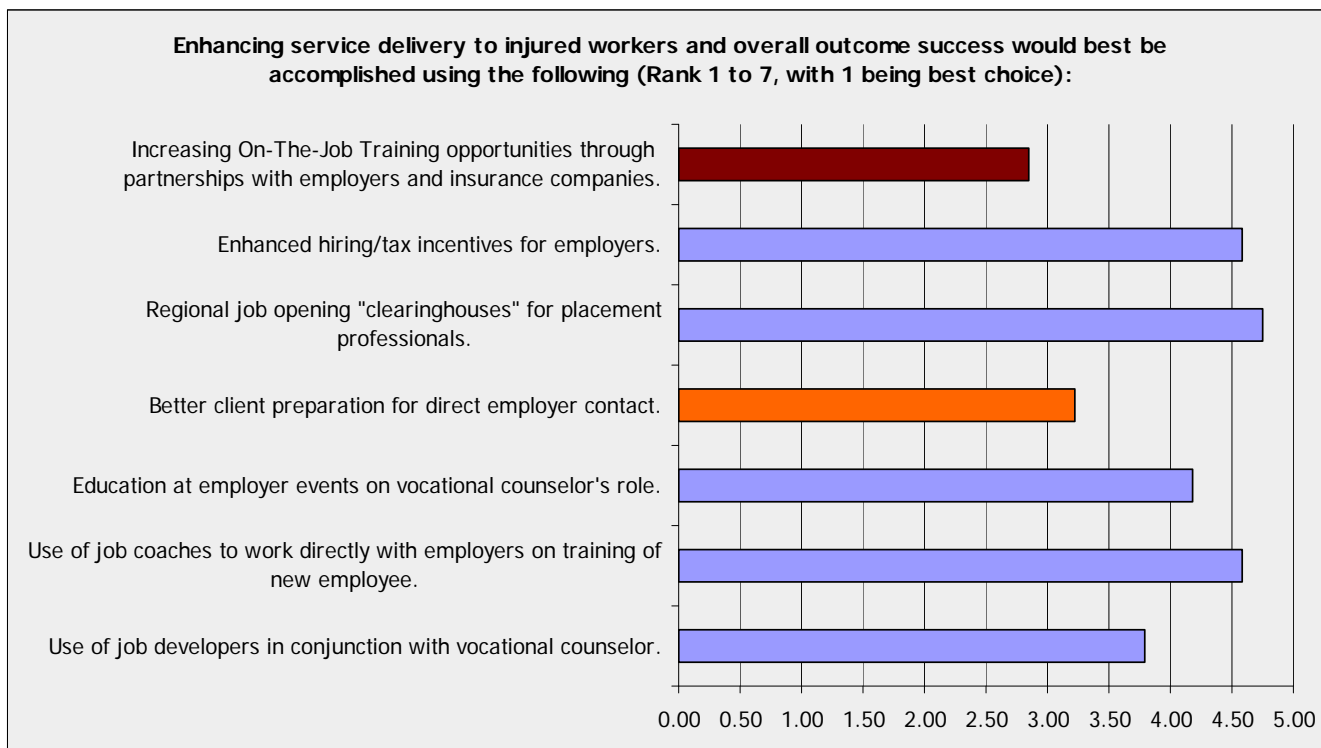
Vocational counselors often times bear the brunt of the frustration from those who hire them to find job opportunities for injured employees. When this process becomes difficult or doesn't happen as fast as others think it should, vocational counseling is deemed ineffective. Many times though, the employee lacks the minimal education to compete in this labor market, so the counselor identifies training opportunities to enhance placement success only to encounter a general lack of support from the payer.



To overcome some of the barriers listed above, counselors offered their opinions on effective tools and techniques for successful job placement. The identified areas of highest impact again peaked with **client preparation**, followed by **job seeking skills training**, and **skills analysis**. A common tactic whereby the **counselor follows up** with employers directly to check on client job application activity actually **ranked lowest** in overall impact. This ranking is consistent with the message throughout the survey that more emphasis should be placed on client accountability and autonomy in the job development and placement process.



Finally, counselors were asked to rank several possible avenues for enhancing service delivery to injured workers. The option with the highest rating was **Increasing On-The-Job Training opportunities through partnerships with employers and insurance companies**. In a nutshell, this is suggesting that On-The-Job training options, where employers can “train to hire” potential employees (who continue to receive workers’ compensation during training) with the option of hiring at the end of a pre-determined timeframe can be a win-win scenario for all involved. Partnerships between employers and insurance companies are needed in order to manage the liability and wage & hour aspects of such an arrangement, but it can work. Coming in a close second was **Better client preparation for direct employer contact**, which the survey has already established as a major component to more effective job development and placement.



## **PARTICIPANT WRITTEN RESPONSES**

Many of the questions on the survey provided space for individual participant feedback, which will be summarized below within several common themes: **Partnering between stakeholders**; **Employer involvement**; **Autonomy & client preparation**; **Counselor preparation**; **Education and skill enhancement (PEACE)**.

### **Partnering Between Stakeholders**

Respondents found this to be an integral component for consideration in successful job placement in several survey questions. Specific responses include the following techniques for counselor consideration in creative placement:

- In my establishing a relationship with potential employers and re-contacting them to set up an informational interview possibly with a Starbucks free drink card has been extremely helpful (Assisted Living Establishments).
- The development of an advisory committee of employers who actively support and are committed to hiring persons with disabilities.



- The use of job shadowing that leads to an interview and potential hire through establishing a trusting relationship with a prospective employer.
- Obtaining a 30/60 day Trial Work Opportunity for demonstration of the necessary skill sets to meet the needs of the employer.
- Volunteer activity, networking, follow up, increasing skill levels.

### **Employer Involvement**

Obviously the employer is the critical component to ultimate success with placement. In a review of 37 comments noted in the survey, 10 comments directly reference a need for 1 on 1 prospective employer interaction, either by the counselor or by the client. Here are some specific responses that in some way require direct employer involvement:

- On the job training and work experience.
- Working with HR or risk management.
- Informational interviews that lead into an offer of employment.
- On -the -job training. Letting comp pay their wages while another employer trains them and gives them a trial work period.
- Getting clients in front of potential employers or being able to speak directly to them.
- The job duties are obtained to ensure the position can be carried out by the IW.
- In todays market many employers are not interested in speaking in person or even over the phone due to the high number of job seekers.

Steadily increasing employer requirements in terms of the physical & mental demands of jobs; makes reasonable accommodations much more difficult.

### **Autonomy & Client Preparation:**

The development of job search skills, application of personal networks of contacts, successful employer interaction, and client autonomy are repeatedly noted to hold high value to placement success. Consequently, counseling skills to achieve client participation and adherence to goals is required for success. In the initial evaluation stage, survey results recommend assessment of job seeker characteristics. The application of values counseling would seem to be an early component of work return planning. Specific responses that underscore the importance of client preparation are as follows:

- It has been my experience that the more (job-seeking) information/skills the client has, the better chance they have of securing employment. And, of course, their motivation...
- To show the client how one obtains the leads, constructs cover letters and tailors the resume for each position applied for is crucial. Working alongside the client is very instrumental, giving them confidence along the way.
- Training that provides soft skills and academic remediation....development of hope, confidence and tools needed for success
- Formal Job Clubs as they exist now in Michigan are less than worthless BUT teaching those same skills one-on-one is very important. I sure wish we had Job Clubs again that really work. None exist any longer.
- Identification of attitudes and beliefs early on.
- Working along side of the job seeker is instrumental in success.
- Mock interviews to practice the interview.
- Identification of job seeker "wants".
- Education on internet use for employment research.
- Appropriate ways of handling discussion of disability.

## **Counselor Preparation**

Knowing the employer community and understanding specific employer need is rated high, with face to face employer contact, knowledge of posted job openings and knowledge of industry requirements all falling within the highly effective category. Here are some individual responses:

- Treat them (clients) with respect and dignity. Ensure they understand your role and that your objective is to help them. Be their cheerleader and counselor. I don't turn my phone off until nine and tell my clients they can call me on weekends as well. Be Nice!
- Direct/personal contact with employers.
- Counseling the client.
- To show the client how one obtains the leads, constructs cover letters and tailors the resume for each position applied for is crucial. Working along side the client is very instrumental, giving them confidence along the way.

## **Education and Skill Enhancement**

The ability to compete in this economy is directly linked to a job seeker's education and skill level. A poor job market also tends to drive many unemployed workers with college degrees down the "labor market ladder" in order to make ends meet, meaning that jobs typically held by non-degreed employees have higher than normal applicant activity by those with formal degrees. Subsequently, an even stronger case can be made for increased education and training, whether on-the-job, short-term, or college in order to level the playing field for injured employees. Survey participants validate the need for training support with their comments:

- On -the -job training. Letting comp pay their wages while another employer trains then and gives then a trial work period.
- Development of soft skills.
- Education on internet use for employment research.
- Workers' Comp insurance willing to pay for skill training for new employment.
- Volunteer activity, networking, follow up, increasing skill levels.
- Education and new training.
- Well, early intervention is still the key along with education of the IW in job seeking skills that work.
- Best opportunity is with a 30/60 day Trial Work Opportunity so Employer can "try out" the customer and customer can demonstrate they have the skills the employer is seeking.
- On the job training and work experience.
- Short-term (6 mos. or less), cost effective (less than \$5K) retraining in jobs that are in high demand. Money spent on traditional VR doing JD for 6-9 mos. is on avg. around \$8K+. Educate employer on this cost savings to them.
- Retraining is a huge factor in most cases, though obtaining approval from insurance companies is difficult; in the big picture and long haul, if appropriate for a client, it really makes cost-effective sense to retrain individuals, even short term.

## SUMMARY

This survey seeks to provide some insight and guidance for professionals involved in job development and placement, as well as stimulate the reader to be as creative as possible when assisting in the development of job opportunities for injured workers. By no means are the authors suggesting this process is easy in today's world. In fact, if you follow the recommendations of the survey participants and authors, your job will become more time-consuming. However, if you believe that the ultimate goal of the job development and placement process is assisting people with injuries and disabilities with securing (and retaining) employment, then you probably already know how time consuming this work can be when done right! With that said, we hope this survey validates your own opinions on job placement and development, and facilitates new ideas as you assist current and future clients. And when you feel like you're in a counseling "rut" and successful placements are few and far between, give **PEACE** a chance to make a positive impact on your outcomes!