

## Chapter 12

# Vocational Interests and Needs of Unemployed, Low-Education Adults with Severe Substance Abuse Problems in Anchorage, Alaska

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Vocational assessment data were collected from 94 low-education adults with severe substance abuse problems not currently in treatment. Participants completed the My Vocational Situation (MVS), Self-Directed Search (SDS), and Reading-Free Vocational Interest Inventory (R-FVII). Lower scores than the normative sample were revealed on all MVS scales, with scores for men being significantly lower than the normative sample. These findings indicate that these participants, particularly the men, lack a clear and stable view of their occupational future, need information to clarify their occupational options and goals, and perceive multiple barriers in attaining employment. SDS and R-FVII results provide detailed information about these participants' occupational interests and vocational likes and dislikes. These findings highlight vocational counseling and guidance as critical needs for individuals with severe substance abuse problems who are unable or unwilling to seek treatment. Providing vocational services to this out-of-treatment population may be an essential pathway for their long-term recovery.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the substance abuse treatment community, gaining and maintaining gainful employment is recognized as a critical component of successful treatment and long-term recovery. For example, Lamb et al. (1996) found that stability of one's occupational role before entering treatment was strongly related to retention in substance abuse treatment. Conversely, Milby et al. (2010) found that longer abstinence after treatment was associated with increased likelihood of stable employment. Given this relationship between employment and long-term treatment outcomes, considerable research has been conducted into the effects of adding vocational rehabilitation services into substance abuse treatment programs (Platt, 1995). What has drawn less research attention is the provision of such services to individuals with severe substance abuse problems who are unable or unwilling to seek treatment. Following, we review the research literature on the effects of providing vocational rehabilitation services within substance abuse treatment. This literature review provides the basis for this study's focus on the vocational needs of individuals who have serious substance abuse problems but are not currently in treatment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into the effects of providing vocational rehabilitation in substance abuse treatment has followed three main lines of inquiry. The first type of research has focused on identifying external barriers to employment in drug users, including the lack of jobs due to local economic environments, or a scarcity of jobs that are structured in such a way that recovering individuals can perform them. Two examples of this research include the evaluation of the Wildcat experiment (Friedman, 1978) and the National Supported Work Demonstration Project (Dickinson, 1981). These programs included intensive case management and supportive services in

addition to providing subsidized employment. Successful outcomes of these projects included longer length of participation in treatment programs and movement from subsidized to unsubsidized jobs.

Platt, Widman, Lidz, Rubenstein, and Thompson (1998) and Vines and Mandell (1999) focused on the assessment of external barriers to employment among individuals with substance addictions and ways in which treatment programs can reduce the barriers through collaborative relationships with other service providers. Schottenfeld, Pantaloni, Chawarski, and Pakes (2000) found that a community reinforcement approach to drug treatment that included engagement in alternative activities (such as work and family activities) for opiate and cocaine addicts was effective. This research attempted to quantify the amount of time spent on various activities to understand the impact of positive and negative uses of time on recovery from addiction, and to provide external community support to the individual in spending time on positive activities. French, Dennis, McDougal, Karuntzos, and Hubbard (1992), conducted a large effort to assess the need for and efficacy of training and employment programs in methadone maintenance. These researchers found that the participants had a strong interest in such services but had somewhat unrealistic expectations about their value.

The second type of research has focused on addressing individual or personal barriers that people with severe substance abuse problems experience with respect to employment. Programs to address these barriers have attempted to increase personal skills to enhance the prospects for gainful employment. An example of this type of program was developed by Loeb, LeVois, and Copper (1981). Designated the Job Seeker's Workshop, the content of this program involved three components: job interviewing skills, instruction in the completion of application forms, and job search procedures. The intent of these skill building components was to increase the likelihood that participants could find gainful employment. Platt, Husband, Hermalin, Carter, and Metzger (1993) developed an intervention

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