

Authors: Dr. Marfels, B, Prof. Dr. Niehaus, M,

Contact Information: University of Cologne, Unit of Labour and Vocational Rehabilitation, Herbert - Lewin - Str. 2, 50931 Koeln, Germany, Phone: 0049-221 – 470 4954, Fax: 0049-221 – 470 7722, Mathilde.Niehaus@uni-koeln.de, Britta.Marfels@uni-koeln.de

COMPETENCIES AND TASKS OF DISABILITY MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS IN GERMANY

I Background

The competencies of rehabilitation experts in the promotion of vocational and social participation of disabled persons are becoming increasingly important in light of far-reaching socio-political changes. Both in Germany and abroad we find people with different qualifications and professional backgrounds entering the rehabilitation field (Scully et al. 1999). In consequence, Disability Managers are emerging as a new professional group alongside established in-house representative bodies. The German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV)¹ provides training to become a Certified Disability Management Professional (CDMP), based on the Canadian model. This represents another instance of the international drive to standardize and establish quality management for training programs for counselors in vocational rehabilitation (Greve & Niehaus, 2007).

While the tasks and competencies of rehabilitation experts have been the focus of research in the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand for a long time, there are no empirical studies on Germany so far. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify and describe the competencies, tasks and fields of action of disability managers in Germany. The results are meant to improve the training and certification of disability management professionals. In addition, the findings are to be discussed in the international context.

II Methods

Instruments

¹ The DGUV is the umbrella association of the accident insurance institutions for the industrial and public sectors in Germany. Collectively they insure a total of seventy million people against the consequences of occupational accidents and diseases as well as commuting accidents.

The questionnaire employed in this study was developed by Matthews, Buys, Randall, Biggs and Hazelwood (2009) and combines items from two instruments: the Rehabilitation Skills Inventory-Amended 1 (RSI-I) and the International Survey of Disability Management Practices (ISDMP). The authors provided the questionnaire for the German study for the purpose of comparing the results on an international basis. It was translated into German and adapted to the German rehabilitation system. The vocational rehabilitation and disability management areas covered include *inter alia* vocational counseling, personal counseling, professional practice, case management, and disability prevention. The questionnaire consists of socio-demographic questions and 114 items relating to the diverse tasks and fields of action in disability management. These were rated in terms of importance and frequency.

Participants

The study was conducted as an online survey over two time periods: first from July to December 2008 and second from March to May 2010. In both cases participants were recruited via the German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV). In the first period, the questionnaire was completed by 108 persons and in the second by 109. That results in a total return of 217 questionnaires. The respondents' mean age was 45 (SD 7.90) and the group was split almost equally between men (53%) and women (47%). 83 percent of respondents completed their training as a Certified Disability Management Professional. Most of the respondents held a university degree. Participants came from a wide range of professional backgrounds. Approximately 40 percent worked in public administration, but medical, social, technical and commercial professions were also represented. 65 percent worked in the public sector, most of them at the German Social Accident Insurance. Half of all respondents worked for large companies with more than 250 employees.

III Results

In order to identify the key tasks and competencies of rehabilitation experts in Germany, factor analyses were carried out. Every item of the questionnaire was rated in terms of importance and frequency. Two important areas of activity emerged. The first competency domain focuses on work with the client and their vocational rehabilitation. The second domain is mainly concerned with organizational and managerial tasks. There are *interindividual* differences in the rating of these competency domains, i.e. different

people perform a given task more or less frequently or consider it more or less important. *Intraindividually*, however, there was no difference between frequency and importance ratings.

Discriminant analysis was employed to determine whether these differences had a systematic relationship with certain variables such as personal characteristics or their employment setting. Respondents' gender and sector of employment emerged as relevant variables. Men and women have the same tasks and responsibilities, but they tend to take a different view on which aspects of their work are more important. On average, women consider the following tasks more important than their male counterparts: the development of management strategies, the use of social networks as well as the supervision of colleagues. By contrast, men find it important to promote disability management programs in companies and among the general public. Moreover, it is important to them that they assume a leadership role in disability management. The second characteristic correlated to differences in ratings is the sector in which the respondent works. Respondents rate tasks differently both in terms of frequency and in terms of importance, depending on whether they are employed by the private or the public sector. The most noteworthy difference is that those people who work in the private sector are more concerned with research, while working in the public sector demands a more detailed knowledge of the legislation and its application in this area. This difference is partially due to the fact that different professions are represented in the two groups. In the private sector, there are more doctors, psychologists and people in management positions. The public sector, on the other hand, has more rehabilitation counselors and case managers.

IV Discussion

Several studies show that the involvement of a disability management professional in the return-to-work process is an important key to integration success (cf. Niehaus et al., 2008; Franche et al., 2006). By extension, appropriate training of these professionals is of utmost importance for the individual as well as the company. This study is the first to investigate which tasks professional rehabilitation counselors in Germany fulfill and how they rate the importance of these tasks in everyday professional life. Two competency domains were identified: on the one hand, the work with the client and on the other hand, organizational and managerial tasks. This result corresponds to Habeck & Kir-

chner's (1999) theoretical model on disability management, which Currier et al. corroborated empirically in 2001. According to the theory, disability management is conceptualized at two levels of practice, Level I organizational focus and Level II human-service oriented. Previous studies using factor analysis, e.g. from Australia (cf. Matthews et al., 2009) or the USA, found very many areas of competency in terms of empirical dimensions. This indicates a high degree of specialization among rehabilitation professionals.

In Germany, case management is traditionally considered a responsibility of rehabilitation counselors. By contrast, the second competency domain, with an organizational focus, represents a new area of responsibility, related to legislative changes. Since 2004 German employers have been legally obliged to assume responsibility for the prevention of occupational diseases and for the vocational rehabilitation of affected employees. This particular German development is reflected in both competency domains. Likewise the diversity of competencies in other countries is a consequence of their historic development, institutions and legislation in the area of vocational rehabilitation. The existence of a second competency domain, which focuses on organization, may be a first step towards specialization and could be the result of the legislature defining vocational rehabilitation as a managerial task that falls to the employer. This area will most likely become even more important in the future.

References

- Currier, K. F., Chan, F., Berven, N. L., Habeck, R. V., & Taylor, D. W. (2001). Functions and Knowledge Domains for Disability Management Practice: A Delphi Study. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, (44, 3), 133–143.
- Franché, R.L., Cullen, K., Clarke, J., MacEachen, E., Frank, J., Sinclair, S. & Reardon, R. (2006). Workplace-based Return-to-Work Interventions: A Systematic Review of the Quantitative and Qualitative Literature (Summary). Toronto: Institute for Work & Health.
- Habeck, R. V. & Kirchner, K. (1999). Case-management issues within employer-based disability management. In F. Chan & M. J. Leahy (Eds.), *Health care and disability case management* (pp. 239-264). Lake Zurich, IL: Vocational Consultants Press.
- Matthews, L.R, Buys, N., Randall, C, Biggs, H., Hazelwood, Z. (2009). Evolution of vocational rehabilitation competencies in Australia. *Int J Rehabil Res*. 2009 Sep 25. [Epub ahead of print].
- Niehaus, M., Magin, J., Marfels, B., Vater, E.G., Werkstetter, E. (2008). Betriebliches Eingliederungsmanagement. Studie zur Umsetzung des Betrieblichen Eingliederungsmanagements nach § 84 Abs. 2 SGB IX. Forschungsbericht F374. Berlin: Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales.

- Niehaus, M., Bernhard, D. & Marfels, B. (in press). Changes in managing disability at the workplace in Germany: Chances of professionalization.
- Scully, S.M., Habeck, R. V., Leahy, M. J. (1999). Knowledge and skill areas associated with disability management practice for rehabilitation counselors. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, (43, 1), 20-29.
- Rosenthal, D.A., Hursh, N., Lui, J., Isom, R., Sasson, J. (2007). A Survey of current Disability Management Practice. Emerging trends and implications for Certification. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, (50, 2), 76-86.
- Tate, D., Habeck, R., Galvin, D. (1986). Disability Management. Origins, Concepts and Principles for practice. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, (17), 5-12.
- Wright, G. N., Leahy, M. J., Shapson, P. R. (1987). Rehabilitation Skills Inventory: Importance of Counselor Competencies. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, (31, 2), 107-118.