What is the difference between a vocational evaluation and a vocational assessment?

The terms vocational evaluation and vocational assessment are sometimes used interchangeably. Technically, vocational assessment refers to a bigger picture of an individual’s work/training background, general functional abilities, and social/behavioral characteristics. It can include information about medical factors, psychological makeup, educational background, and work skills and abilities. The term vocational evaluation refers to an appraisal of a person’s work-related characteristics that are important to education and training and to getting and keeping a job. Examples of these characteristics include occupational interests, specific job skills, general intelligence, etc.

What can I expect if my son/daughter is referred for a vocational evaluation?

A thorough vocational evaluation may include a variety activities, including: an assessment of the students’ areas of interest; aptitude and achievement tests (usually pencil and paper tests), and performance tests which measure coordination, dexterity, learning styles, etc. These tests may be administered by rehabilitation counselors and they attempt to measure and predict vocational potential and behavior. A teacher in a vocational education program may also perform some types of assessments. Using assistive technology and equipment to modify assessment tools is part of the role of the vocational evaluator. A vocational evaluation can take place in a rehabilitation facility, at a work site or at home. It can vary in length from several hours to 2 months.

The functional vocational assessment is the only type of student assessment that is specifically addressed in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s transition requirements. This type of assessment identifies an individual’s vocational potential by measuring his/her performance on actual job tasks in a variety of environments. Although this type of assessment is not necessary for every student, it does offer another measure in addition to /instead of standardized tests. The assessment should yield two outcomes:

1. It should provide students with enough understanding of their strengths, area(s) of need, and the job market to explore sufficiently what work they might or might not enjoy and for what jobs they have particular talents; and
2. It should provide instructors, employers, and community services staff with information about the student’s preferences, behavior, approach to learning, initiative, need for assistive technology, communication needs, physical and mental endurance, medical status, transportation needs, specific work skills, and the need for specific instructional approaches.

If you are not familiar with a local resource that can assist you in conducting a functional vocational assessment, consider contacting a community human services provider or a state agency (e.g., MRC, DMR, DOE, DET).

The central aim of an assessment is to identify the individual’s vocational assets and capabilities. Recommendations should follow that provide a sense of direction for the person interested in a job. They should reflect the information obtained from the evaluation.

What are the different types of vocational evaluation?

There are a number of methods of vocational assessments. It is recognized that the closer the testing method is to the real situation one is measuring (i.e. the job/job environment) the more valid the method. Assessments in simulated work environments and in facility based programs such as sheltered workshops, simply do not contain the many elements of actual work environments (i.e. noise level, social culture, etc.) which are necessary to make an educated choice concerning employment options. The different methods of evaluation are listed below. We begin with those methods that most closely resemble real work, and are therefore considered most valid:

- **Job Site Evaluation:** an “on the job evaluation” involves assessing an individual in the actual work setting. The evaluator places the individual in a competitive work setting to assess directly his or her ability to acquire a job and to perform successfully in a competitive environment. In such a setting all the environmental conditions are real and one can easily assess how the individual functions in the actual job. This method is effective when
some form of pre-evaluation has been performed, to provide a good match of the individual with the job site. This can improve the evaluation effectiveness, which could otherwise be time consuming and frustrating for the student, employer, and the evaluator.

- **Situational Assessment**: this assessment takes place at a job site in the community. Through situational assessment, the job seeker is given a real choice through exposure to a variety of work environments. Here are some other benefits of situational assessments:
  - Skills are assessed that are used in actual work environments. Support needs and availability can be more easily identified.
  - Useful method for people with little or no work experience, difficulties with communication or people whose job goals are unclear.
  - Allows for information to be generated quickly concerning employment options.

- **Work Sample Techniques**: this method involves using a sample of work based upon a job analysis of the employee’s tasks/environment. In order to be effective, the sample should approximate real life jobs to the extent possible. It should simulate the complete range of work activities (motions, mental functioning, performance demands, operations, and materials and equipment used) that make up a particular job or occupational area. This type of evaluation is usually performed in a rehabilitation facility. The difficulties with this type of evaluation are many:
  1. developing samples for the many types of jobs and the rapidly changing technology is not possible.
  2. many aspects of a job are not accurately measured in a rehabilitation environment, including the social experience, heat, noise, and motivation.
  3. scores are normed against people who usually do the job.
  4. if the individual does not directly relate the meaning of the test to an employment activity, performance may not represent that which he/she would be capable of in a work setting.

- **Psychometric Testing**: Sometimes, psychometric/psychological tests are the only way of obtaining certain kinds of information. Basic reading, spelling, writing and arithmetic skills are commonly assessed by tests. The legal definition of developmental disabilities in some states is partially based on IQ scores form specific tests that are accepted as valid. Eligibility determination for some state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies requires that information be obtained through testing. Of the four evaluation methods, psychological testing is the most removed from assessing ability for jobs. This is because these tests often measure cognitive abilities rather than the psychomotor abilities and work behaviors that are related more closely to most work settings. This method is considered ineffective in evaluating people with disabilities with low literacy levels who have had unsatisfactory experiences with these tests in school.

What else should I know about vocational evaluations?

If they are used and administered properly, evaluations can provide helpful information about a person’s interests, skills and abilities, as well as what jobs he/she might find most fulfilling. Here are some general points about evaluations:

- Evaluations can be used to answer a specific question (i.e. what might be helpful accommodations for the individual at home, school, and work?).
- Relying on scores as indicators of absolute performance is a serious misuse of tests and their results.
- Evaluations which call on a number of people for information will provide the most information about the individual. These people may include teachers, parents, evaluators, etc., and of course, the students themselves.
- Evaluations may be formal or informal. Either type should include an assessment of practical activities as well as standard testing.