

Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques as an Educational Tool for the Unemployed

Employment status has a strong and well-documented connection with mental health. In particular, unemployment correlates strongly with poor mental health,¹ and can make the search for a new job more difficult.² There is a need for interventions that diminish the undesirable emotional consequences of unemployment to help individuals become reemployed.³ Outside of the United States, studies have shown promising results in the use of cognitive-behavioral (CB) interventions for individuals who are struggling with unemployment. These programs have helped job seekers cope with job loss, become reemployed, and stay employed longer.⁴

Based on these research findings, the use of CB techniques could benefit job seekers in the United States workforce system. However, CB techniques and other socioemotional skill training are rarely offered in the United States workforce system. There is a dearth of information on the feasibility of using a large-scale CB intervention, as well as its potential for improving job-search efficacy and other job-seeker outcomes.

A Promising Model in Oregon



A program model called Rethinking Job Search (Rethinking) has demonstrated that American Job Centers, working in concert with other stakeholder groups, can deliver CB education that promotes job-search efficacy.⁵ The program shows great potential for expansion on a large scale in both the workforce system and other training and education settings. Developed and led by the Willamette Workforce Partnership, Rethinking services were offered from January 2016 to September 2018 in 10 counties in Oregon through a collaborative effort involving the state Unemployment Insurance (UI) system, Oregon Employment Department, and local workforce boards. A total of 1,215 job seekers participated in the program. To test the effectiveness of Rethinking, Public Policy Associates, Inc. (PPA) conducted an independent evaluation of the statewide program, using three components: a formative study, a quasi-experimental outcomes study, and a cost-effectiveness study.

Key Features of the Rethinking Program

- Rethinking was an intensive educational workshop series that used CB techniques intended to enhance motivation and self-efficacy in job-search activities. Each workshop was conducted over four weeks, with two-hour sessions three times a week with an average of eight job seekers per workshop.
- The program used a proprietary training curriculum, originally developed and tested in an earlier, smaller-scale pilot in Oregon.
- The instructional approach included participant-driven facilitated discussion, self-reflection homework, and the use of personal job-search tracking and assessment logs.
- The program was delivered by highly qualified, carefully trained facilitators who participated in a peer-learning community.
- To ensure consistent implementation across the 10 counties, rigorous fidelity checks and monitoring were conducted throughout the program.



“This helped steel my resolve to keep looking for a job I want and to realize there are good resources available to help me in that quest.”

– Rethinking Job Search Participant



The formative study found that Rethinking was carried out very effectively. Thanks to careful planning and regular fidelity checks by the program manager, Rethinking was delivered with little variation across sites. The quality of facilitation was high and was sustained over time, indicating that the criteria for facilitator selection and training were appropriate. The program exceeded targets for recruitment and completion, and participant satisfaction was very high. Despite very open eligibility requirements, the program attracted primarily older white women to enroll.

The outcomes of Rethinking also were very promising and suggested that the program offers a strong value proposition. It was effective in boosting long-term employment outcomes; vis-à-vis a comparison group, Rethinking participants were more likely to be employed in the third quarter after exiting the program, and consumed fewer weeks of UI benefits. The effect sizes for these outcomes were small but statistically significant.

Implications

PPA offers the following questions and suggestions to consider in the application of CB techniques as an educational tool for workforce development.

References

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- ² "Long-Term Unemployed Survey," 2011, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and NPR News, retrieved September 25, 2019, from <https://www.kff.org/other/poll-finding/long-term-unemployed-survey/>.
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- ⁵ Public Policy Associates Inc., *Rethinking Job Search Final Report* (Lansing, MI: Public Policy Associates, Inc., 2019), https://willwp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/RJSFinalReport_508.pdf.

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Questions to Consider

- How should the Rethinking model be adapted to best serve different population groups? What specific adjustments are needed to ensure culturally responsive programming?
- What are the longer-term outcomes and impacts of CB educational interventions?
- What are the appropriate benchmarks for assessing participant success, and how should these be determined?
- What are the most effective ways and means to ensure workshop facilitators' access to technical support and peer learning? How can this be done efficiently?
- What other socioemotional tools have similar efficacy and outcomes for job seekers and employers?
- What other skill development or resources could complement CB interventions?

Suggested Practices and Policies

Adapt the model for other populations and settings. Many different populations could benefit from the use of CB techniques because the technique is broadly applicable, irrespective of mental health status. Implementation is likely to be effective in the traditional workforce system and for other education and training service providers.

Generate Buy-In. Workforce system partners' buy-in and understanding can be fostered using a robust orientation to the program and its benefits. State UI offices could be potential investors where programming targets UI beneficiaries.

Invest in quality facilitation. The facilitators were repeatedly cited as a key asset of Rethinking. To replicate the successes of Rethinking, organizers of similar programs should invest in facilitators with experience in education, training, or coaching; knowledge of adult learning and motivation theories; and strong emotional intelligence.

Document processes and results. To grow the evidence base for the use of CB techniques as an educational tool, future program efforts should evaluate and share their experiences and results so that other practitioners can learn from them and apply their benefits and lessons to other contexts.