



Executive Summary

Identification of
ROLES AND
FUNCTIONS
of Orientation and
Mobility Specialists

**Mississippi
State
University**



**Pennsylvania
College of
Optometry**

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Purpose of the Study

For rehabilitation professionals to be most effective, they need training that relates to actual on-the-job demands. Constantly updated roles and functions studies of Orientation and Mobility (O&M) specialists are essential in designing relevant preservice and continuing education curricula. The roles and functions of rehabilitation counselors, for example, have been heavily studied and the results have been employed to plan appropriate training for this profession. Relatively little work, however, has been done in identifying current roles and functions of O&M specialists. This process is critical to the ability of professionals in the field to investigate and maintain the relevance of its professional preparation and continuing education programs. Professionals with state-of-the-art knowledge and skills are essential for optimal delivery of services to clients.

The study had two major objectives: (1) to identify current roles and functions of O&M specialists and (2) to identify the training needs of this group as they relate to their current work. To address these goals a survey instrument, derived from actual job descriptions received from a variety of settings nationwide, was pilot tested on a randomly selected national sample of O&M specialists working in a variety of settings. A factor analysis and a review by a national panel of experts

resulted in a final instrument comprised of 100 job task items. The respondents were asked to rate each item for importance on their job (on a scale from 0 to 4). In addition, they were asked to indicate their need (yes/no) for additional training on each of the 100 items. Each respondent was also asked to answer a 22 item demographic questionnaire which included items related to their present job, their client caseload, and their professional and educational background.

The results of this survey and implications of the findings directly relate to the empirical definition of the profession of O&M and to the current training needs of this group. Among the findings are some striking instances of high stated training needs in areas which are not traditionally addressed in depth by professional preparation or continuing education programs.

Demographics of the Sample

The total sample was derived from two sources. First, the survey was sent to every member of the 1988 AER Division IX mailing list. In addition, a copy of the survey was sent to the following organizations listed in the *AFB Directory of Agencies Serving the Visually Handicapped in the U.S.* (American Foundation for the Blind, 1984): public and private rehabilitation agencies, schools for the blind/visually

impaired, and low vision services. The total number of surveys mailed was 1,600. The total design method for mail and telephone surveys (Dillman, 1978) was used to insure optimal response rate, which resulted in 1,164 responses for an overall response rate of 73%. A fairly large number (462) of these returned surveys were incomplete and unusable for a variety of stated reasons, such as the agency had no orientation and mobility specialists working there (229), the individual had moved with no forwarding address (70), the individual had left the field (53), the survey was a duplicate (21), or simply that the survey was not applicable (71). The remaining surveys (702) were complete and appropriate for final analysis.

Personal and Professional Characteristics

The average age of the respondent was 36 years. Females accounted for 65.6% of the sample and 97.4% of those responding indicated that they had no vision problems. On average, they had 9.7 years of rehabilitation related work experience and had been employed in their present position an average of 6.3 years. When information was requested about certification, 78% indicated certification as an orientation and mobility instructor/specialist and 42% as a teacher of the visually impaired.

Work Settings and Caseload Characteristics

When asked about their work settings, 46% of the respondents indicated that they were in educational settings. Public and private rehabilitation/social service agencies accounted for 54% of the respondents.

In indicating all major areas of responsibility, 89% of the respondents checked O&M instruction; 63%, low vision assessment/low vision follow-up training; and 43%, case management/coordination of services. The average percentage of time spent in giving direct client services was 65%.

Thirty-five percent of the respondents' clients were reported to be 15 years old or younger, 29% were 16 to 49 years old, and 27% were 50 years of age or older. In regards to the visual status of their clients, 29% were reported to be totally blind and 62% of the clients were reported to be partially sighted. Respondents estimated that 54% of their clients had handicaps in addition to visual impairment.

Tasks Orientation and Mobility Specialists Regard as Most Important to Adequately Perform Their Current Jobs

Case Management

Functions which are associated with case management (i.e., interviewing of clients, preparation of individualized rehabilitation plans, review of progress and provision of client feedback, functioning as an interdisciplinary team member, and maintenance of ethical and legal confidentiality) were cited as being important on the job. No significant need for further training was cited in these specific areas.

Assessment

Items associated with sensory assessment (i.e., use of senses and functional vision assessment) were ranked as very important. The respondents' stated need for training was high in these areas, especially for low vision assessment.

Assessment of concepts and travel skills was regarded as important, but little need for further training in these areas was stated.

Teaching and Instruction

Traditional or basic O&M teaching and instructional items were regarded as the most important on the job by the O&M specialists. Other than concept development, there were few stated needs for additional training. Teaching use of ambulatory devices (i.e., walkers, wheelchairs, and orthopedic canes) was regarded as of low importance on the job, but as an area of very high need for additional training.

Working with Low Vision Clients

A large number of O&M specialists regarded maintaining current knowledge relevant to working with low vision clients, teaching strategies for visual efficiency, and the use of distance optical aids as being very important to their jobs. This was accompanied by a high stated need for further training.

Working with Special Needs

Working with individuals having handicaps in addition to vision impairment and working with the elderly were regarded as very important. Both items also had high stated needs for further training, especially in terms of dealing with additional handicaps.

Tasks Orientation and Mobility Specialists Regard as Least Important to Adequately Perform Their Current Jobs

Electronic Travel Aids (ETAs)

The importance on the job of teaching all of the ETAs (Laser Cane, Sonic Guide, and Pathsounder/Mowatt) was rated very low. On the other hand, approximately half of the respondents indicated a high need for further training in these areas.

Traditional Rehabilitation Teaching Items

Teaching of traditional rehabilitation teaching items (i.e., self-health care, medication management, home management, and ADL) was regarded to be of low importance on the job. The respondents tended to be more positive about the assessment and making of recommendations for environmental and technique modifications in the home, but did not rate teaching these areas as high in job importance. Training in these areas was also not seen as needed.

Administrative/Supervisory Items

Roles that were primarily administrative in nature were generally regarded as having little importance of grants and funding proposals) was also not seen.

Highest Stated Needs for Further Training

Nontraditional Areas

Items that are not traditionally given high priority in O&M professional preparation programs and in O&M job descriptions (i.e., supportive counseling to client and family, interpretation of functional implications of eye disorders, and education on legal rights) were given high training need ratings by the respondents.

Low Vision and Sensory Training

Considerable training was felt to be needed in all areas related to vision and other sensory training. These areas included the administration/assisting with clinical low vision tests, vision stimulation, sensory training, enhancement of visual efficiency, uses of optical aids (near, intermediate, and distance), and maintaining current knowledge relevant to working with low vision clients. This finding may well represent the most uniformly cited cluster of contemporary educational inadequacy highlighted by this study.

Technology Aids and Research

A high level of need for additional training in the teaching of all three types of electronic travel aids was expressed by the O&M specialists.

Maintaining familiarity with new technology and applying new and relevant research findings to on-the-job situations were both cited as areas of high need for additional training.

Special Populations

The highest need for training was in the area of teaching or using deaf/blind communication methods. The importance of this area in the jobs of the respondents, however, was ranked as very low. This response represents an obviously low incidence situation with an enormous impact on training, especially in O&M, which is a high one-on-one teaching modality.

The teaching of ambulatory devices (e.g., walkers, wheelchairs, or orthopedic canes) and instruction to improve/correct psychomotor functioning and endurance/stamina were also given high ratings. It is possible that these may also represent lower-incidence

situations which, nonetheless, require a high level of competence when encountered.

Maintaining current knowledge related to clients with additional impairments and working with the elderly were also regarded as areas of need for additional training.

Miscellaneous

The specific area of preparation of grants/funding proposals received a high rating for additional training, as did that related to maintaining knowledge of medical terminology and procedures for improved consultations, referrals, and follow-through.

Discussion and Recommendations

Empirical Definition of the Profession

The survey items with the highest mean importance values define the profession as it actually exists in terms of practice rather than as defined by national job descriptions or by professional curricula. These items provide an outline of what tasks are considered important to the respondents to adequately perform their current job roles. Presumably, they may also represent their employers' expectations and the criteria used for determining adequate performance of their jobs. Conversely, employers may want to note those items receiving lowest importance ratings, since they were included in the survey because of their frequency in actual job descriptions.

Those items receiving ratings of high importance and low need for training probably indicate those aspects of the profession that are/have been adequately covered in either existing professional

preparation or inservice training programs. It is significant that the preponderance of these items falls into what might be considered traditional, basic, or core skill areas related to the instruction and teaching roles of the profession. That is, they could be construed as representing the basic theory and skills needed to teach specific techniques related to the orientation and mobility of a person with a visual impairment.

Professional Training and Education Needs

The survey items with the highest need values define the areas where professionals express their need and/or desire for additional training. This additional training could be compelled either by their current work needs or by new developments in technology or service delivery policies and populations. These stated needs could also indicate deficiencies in their basic professional preparation training. It is appropriate to note that a number of these items appear to relate to core skill areas, but almost exclusively to the way they apply to special populations and/or problems. These are important areas for professional educators and employers to investigate further.

Those items receiving ratings of low importance but high need for training would seem to indicate areas of low on-the-job incidence but of high professional interest and/or of critical need for competency when the task is required. Professional educators and employers need to look at these areas carefully.

Items with both high importance and high need ratings indicate areas that should be immediately addressed by both employers and professional educators responsible for the development and

implementation of professional preparation and continuing education programs.

Training and Education Preferences

For continuing education programming to be effective, the methods of providing opportunities and the types of delivery would appear to be as important as the choices of content material. The majority of the respondents indicated preference for delivery of continuing education to be conducted either at their own place of work (53%), within commuting distance (75%), or at least within their own state/region (56%), as compared to those who preferred a national conference (30%). In addition, the respondents stated preference for 1-2 day sessions (66%) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, through self-directed learning materials (40%), as compared to 2-6 week courses offering either credit or a certificate (2%).

As to the content of the training and education they require, the respondents have indicated clearly what they want and need. The challenge is for all those concerned (employers and educators alike) to respond with educational programs that are the most meaningful and accessible to those who need them.

Quite clearly, this will require much rethinking of traditional approaches to professional education. To succeed, it will also require collaboration among many organizations and institutions for the planning and implementation of relevant continuing education to their mutual constituencies.

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