

Supporting Transitions to the Workforce for At-Risk Youth

Developing and Using an Occupation-Based Work Skills Assessment

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Since 1999, the Occupational Therapy Training Program in San Francisco (OTTP-SF) has been providing services to youth considered at-risk due to various psychosocial barriers impacting their occupational performance. These barriers include mental health symptoms, homelessness, substance abuse, food insecurity, suspension or expulsion from school, justice system involvement, and histories of abuse or neglect. Primarily grant funded, the services provided by OTTP-SF include individual occupational therapy, clinical case management, psychotherapy, and group therapy co-facilitated by an occupational therapist and either a marriage and family therapist or a social worker. The primary goals of these services include improving social skills, educational achievement, vocational stability, managing mental health symptoms, and connecting with community supports. The unique occu-

pational therapy services delivered through OTTP-SF are specifically client centered and occupation based (Shea & Giles, 2012; Shea & Jackson, 2015; Shea & Siu, 2016).

Job Training for At-Risk Youth

The program offered by OTTP-SF to connect youth to employment opportunities is called Youth Workforce Development (YWD). This program aims to help connect youth (ages 14 to 24 years) involved in the justice system to paid job training programs. Employment and job training programs—common strategies for diverting youth from crime and reducing recidivism—are intended to promote self-sufficiency through acquisition of job skills and career pursuits (Brown, Maxwell, DeJesus, & Schiraldi, 2002; Bullis & Yovanoff, 2006). Productive occupations, such as work, are further found to enhance the well-being of individuals who live with mental illness (Iannelli & Wilding, 2007).



However, simply having an employment opportunity does not necessarily contribute to the health and well-being of an at-risk youth population or prepare them for self-sufficiency. Low participation and high dropout are common among youth who engage in employment programs (Betcherman, Godfrey, Puerto, Rother, & Stavreska, 2007; Heinrich & Holzer, 2011). These youth need to have a better understanding of their interests and existing skills that contribute to successful acquisition and participation in meaningful employment (Bazyk, 2005). Therefore, successful youth employment programs require energy and effort from staff to provide work placements aligned with each person's interests and skills. Occupational therapy practitioners often play important roles in enabling individuals' participation in work (Braveman & Page, 2012) and are well-suited to fulfill this need.

Within the YWD initiative, overseen by the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families, seven community-based organizations (CBOs) were tasked with providing job training for youth involved in the justice system. This training facilitates general skill development, such as résumé writing, interview preparation, and budgeting, among other important workplace skills. On completion of training, youth are connected with supported internships at work sites arranged by the CBOs, thereby enabling them to apply their skills directly in the workplace.

In addition to the aforementioned engagement challenges faced by job training programs at baseline, these CBOs face additional challenges in keeping our youth engaged due to the significant barriers these youth face, including justice system involvement, unstable housing, mental health symptoms, substance abuse, and/or a history of trauma (Skowrya & Cocozza, 2007). These youth are more likely than their peers to drop out of job training programs before completion, or be asked to leave the program due to behavioral concerns and/or inconsistent attendance. In an effort to help more youth successfully complete these programs, occupational therapists at OTTP-SF were asked to provide individualized and skilled support. The salient information and strategies gathered through assessment were to be shared with the CBO via a report highlighting specific recommendations intended to promote the youth's participation in the program.

Taking a New Approach

Within the first 12 months of the YWD program, it became apparent to us, as the occupational therapists working on the program, that the assessment tools we were using were not accurately and succinctly describing the youth's proficiency in the skills that are foundational to work. These assessments often relied on self-report to identify the youth's work-related strengths and areas for development, and they did not include demonstration of work skills. Furthermore, traditional assessments often bored our youth, and it could take multiple appointments, lasting hours, to complete an assessment consultation. Finally, reports shared with the CBOs lacked consistency and brevity, as the combination of assessments given was dependent on each youth. We determined that in order to better meet the needs of the youth in the YWD program, we needed to find an occupation-based assessment tool that (1) was client centered, (2) was uniquely tied to occupational therapy, and (3) provided consistent and concise reporting. These criteria were informed by our experience as well as client and CBO feedback. A comprehensive search yielded limited results, and of those found, no research published on assessment tools for work skills met all the desired parameters. Therefore, it seemed advisable to develop an assessment tool that could meet all of our aforementioned criteria.

Client Centered

Our first consideration was to create an assessment format that would engage the youth while measuring their work skills in a reliable and objective manner. We solicited the opinions of more than 35 youth and 12 occupational therapy colleagues, and several key perspectives emerged, guiding development of the tool. These included that the youth like playing games, experiencing a sense of achievement, talking about their hometown of San Francisco, and solving mysteries. Based on this information, a mystery-solving game, called Double OT (DOT), became the focused format of the assessment. A humorous scenario was therefore born, as youth completing the DOT are asked to locate the missing mustache clip-pers of San Francisco's scruffy mayor.

Within this game-based format, work skills are infused into engaging tasks that elicit open-ended responses. The dichotomy of right versus wrong answers is explicitly deemphasized by providing

multiple ways to demonstrate proficiency in the evaluated skills. Removing this dichotomy further minimizes the potential for the negative feedback that is often experienced by these youth.

Many of the assessment tasks stand alone, as they can be administered as part of the storyline or independently, to measure each skill, offering flexibility to the clinician to proceed fluidly. This approach also helps remove the compounding elements of cognition and memory from the assessment of each skill, because the youth are not required to remember any preceding elements of the storyline to successfully complete each task.

The 11 tasks included in the assessment can be graded up or down depending on the needs of the youth, allowing modification according to each individual's pace and endurance. For example, the task can be read aloud by the occupational therapist if the youth demonstrates difficulty with reading aloud or prefers not to do so. Grading support in this way does not impact the score; rather it provides youth with the supports necessary to demonstrate their skill in each area. These modifications can then be noted on the report as helpful strategies that foster success in the program (see Figure 1 for a sample assessment summary). This process helps the clinician ensure that the assessment process is client centered.

After completing each task, the youth are prompted to reflect on their performance, identify the job skill being assessed, and generalize the skill by providing examples of implementation in the workplace. This processing further assesses the youth's ability to form abstract thoughts, and it promotes the youth's development of greater insight and generalization of skills. The processing element of each task also supports youth's acquisition of professionally used language, as the skill is explicitly named and discussed.

In considering the unique perspectives of our youth, a number of intentional details were incorporated into the format of the tool. To challenge the stereotypes and limitations often imposed on these youth, characters that look like them were placed in powerful and respected roles, such as Mayor, Press Secretary, and Chef. Placing individuals in roles that are not commonly expected, such as a female Referee and an African-American Mayor, intentionally challenges common assumptions of gender or race. The youth are also asked to place

Figure 1. Sample Assessment Summary

Name: John Doe Date of Birth: 12/12/2001 Date of Occupational Therapy Evaluation: 4/12/17 Occupational Therapist: Christine Haworth, MA, OTR/L

<i>Skills & Corresponding Notes</i>	<i>Area for Growth</i>	<i>Functional</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Skills & Corresponding Notes</i>	<i>Area for Growth</i>	<i>Functional</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Self-Care			X	Confidence – becoming more confident in his ability to act independent from his peers (see 5)		X	
Community mobility – able to find his way to new places but prefers support in doing so until comfortable (see 1)		X		Impulse control – demonstrates some difficulties in controlling his impulses (see 6)		X	
Financial management – able to make financial decisions based on needs and limitations, would like help to develop long-term goals (see 2)			X	Motor skills – good fluidity and speed of fine motor skills			X
Generalization – able to generalize skills to their application in work			X	Direction following – prefers to write down instructions			X
Organization – likes to write things down, benefits from structure and prompts (see 3)		X		Clarification – asks for clarification when necessary			X
Planning – wants to improve his planning skills			X	Initiation – is attempting to become more independent in beginning the next step without prompts (see 7)			X
Time management – difficulties monitoring his time and pacing himself accordingly, often misses appointments (see 4)	X			Sequencing			X
Insight – able to identify the skills he would like to work on			X	Social interaction skills – would like to improve his non-verbal communication in professional settings (see 8)			X
Judgment – able to evaluate different options and weigh the pros and cons, attempting to become less influenced by his peers (see 5)			X	Conflict management – independently accounts for other's perspective, wants to "calmly resolve" "not win" in conflicts			X
Problem solving – able to complete complex interpersonal problem solving tasks, some difficulties with organization (see 3)		X		Attention – able to attend independently, especially when he feels safe and is interested in the activity and /or outcome			X

Occupational Therapy Recommendations:

1. Ensure that he is provided with a warm hand-off whenever going to a new place whether that be for work or training. When not possible, support him in planning out his route beforehand and prompt him to mentally go through all of the steps, accounting in his plan for possible delays or setbacks.
2. Provide John with support and a structure in order to develop short and long-term financial plans. Assist him in creating ways in which to track his progress towards these goals such as a calendar or "financial thermometer" visual aid.
3. Prompt John to write things down when given multiple instructions at once or when necessary for him to organize complex elements. Provide him with the option of receiving external structure such as numbered lists, an outline and/or a clear goal.
4. John would like a planner. Provide him with guidance around how to use a planner, possibly even in his phone, and the prompt him to enter appointments into his planner until he begins to do so independently. Eventually, provide John with checklists to mark off as tasks are completed; process afterwards to increase awareness of time needed to complete each task.
5. Support John in his goal of becoming less influenced by his peers by providing him with positive reinforcement when he demonstrates independence of thought or action. If he begins to miss multiple meetings, collaborate with his other supports (mom, case manager, etc.) in order to see if there is a way to collectively support his continued growth in self-directed decision-making.
6. Promote a deeper self-awareness around impulsive behavior. Prompt John to identify times in the previous week during which he acted impulsively, providing examples as needed. Encourage him to share whether or not he was able to control this impulsivity and how. Provide him with the structure to do this regularly, either through a journal or regular guided reflections with a trusted staff member.
7. Foster John's engagement in meaningful activities that encourage him to naturally demonstrate his ability to engage. Explicitly praise him for initiating engagement in new activities.
8. Offer curriculum on nonverbal cues, such as tone, posture and/or facial expression, and encourage John to identify how it is most appropriate to use each across settings. Provide him with opportunities to practice these skills in a supported environment, possibly filmed, and then encourage him to reflect on his performance, highlighting both his strengths and his areas for growth.

Summary:

John presents himself as an insightful young man who takes pride in his developing independence. John shares that he is working towards becoming more independent from the negative influence of his peers and has shown this by taking steps and accessing resources in order to better himself. John benefits from the support of a loving family and shared that he strives hard to "make things great" when he is interested. Provide him with support and praise in order to assist him in developing his self-confidence and his independence from outside influences.

Occupational Therapist's Signature Christine Haworth, MA OTR/L Date 4/21/2017

themselves in novel roles such as Secret Agent or Supervisor, expanding their perception of their own potential. Additionally, to account for the impact of trauma in the lives of many of these youth, triggering language or scenarios, such as any references to violence, fear, or drugs, were avoided, whereas the overly fantastical nature of the mustache clipper mission was emphasized. These considerations enhance the client-centered nature of the assessment tool, fostering a more collaborative tone while uniquely distinguishing DOT from other assessment tools.

Uniquely OT

The assessment needed to measure youth's work skills and areas for growth. To begin, we sought to establish the skill set essential to success in employment. CBO partners, policymakers, and occupational therapists were consulted on which skills they considered integral to work. We then turned to the *Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process, 3rd Edition* (AOTA, 2014) and the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (World Health Organization, 2007) as our main resources to define these skills, aligning the assessment with the scope of the occupational therapy profession.

To best assess each youth's work skills while being mindful of administration time, we parsed out the skills according to whether they are best demonstrated through activity or whether they should be clinically observed. For example, the skill of financial management is best assessed as the youth performs a task that necessitates using this skill, such as by creating a budget based on specific financial limitations. Alternatively, self-management skills, such as coping, are better observed throughout the assessment process as natural challenges arise that cause frustration or other negative emotions.

Furthermore, the tasks selected to elicit demonstration of the youth's skills are occupation-based. These include drawing, map reading, completing a maze, solving a puzzle, role-playing, and sorting, all of which allow the youth to demonstrate the breadth of their skills. The tasks are fun and funny, exemplifying the occupation of play.

Consistent and Concise Reporting

To provide concise information to the CBO partners through a standardized

report, skill demonstration is scored along a three-part scale consisting of "area for growth," "functional," or "independent." This strengths-based scale allows the clinician to score on a continuum that focuses on how the youth's existing skills and abilities can be strengthened to optimize work performance. Scores are determined by the frequency of prompts given, requested, and/or needed for successful task completion. An assessment report offers a chart with checks to indicate the youth's performance for easy reference. Additionally, the report provides strategies for supporting the youth's success in work. These strategies are specific and tangible recommendations for use by the partner CBO to promote the youth's skill development. For example, for a youth who demonstrates an area for growth in terms of cognitive flexibility, a sample recommendation reads "Promote cognitive flexibility through exploration of new, meaningful places and opportunities."

A comprehensive manual was written to accompany the assessment, providing clear instructions on administration processes. It includes definitions and a glossary, directions for scoring, and recommended strategies.

Looking Forward

We are currently working on establishing an evidence base. We have learned a great deal from the youth and CBOs, and this tool honors that experience; it arose as a result of listening to their needs. Although we are still in the early stages of using this tool, we have had significant positive feedback thus far.

Since 2014, we have administered DOT to more than 200 youth and have collaborated with occupational therapists and marriage and family therapists to use it with their clients. Some examples of the youth's responses include that this assessment "is good to help get me thinking about the skills I want to work on," and, "You should make more games—That was fun!" Additionally, the occupational therapists and family therapists with whom we collaborate report, "It's a solid assessment tool," and, "The information directly correlates to my students' transition plans in their individualized education programs. The data will significantly help me formulate transition and employment activities to support their postsecondary and independent living goals." 📧

For information on partnerships to develop related evidence, email ywd@ottp-sf.org

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