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@work

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Member Tip!

Smarter Tools for Classifying Jobs Help When Job Descriptions Are Inadequate

By
Kerri Wizner, MPH, CPH
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MDGuidelines

A current, detailed job description is important for managing a disability claim so that cognitive and physical job demands can be utilized to support an employee's return-to-work (RTW) effort.

Lacking this information can be a serious barrier at almost any point along the effort. When developing work restrictions, transitional duty, or accommodations, job data is critical, and time is of the essence to keep the employee on-track for a timely RTW.

Too many employers don't fund job descriptions; perhaps they think vendors should pay for this, or the business case for job descriptions is too complex. Whatever the reason, absence professionals too often must find ways to facilitate RTW efforts with an outdated job description, or nothing at all.

When that happens and employers don't have the ideal of annually updated job descriptions, how do they keep moving forward toward RTW? Federal agencies provide data based on extensive occupational research that can give case managers surprisingly detailed job demands. These tools provide an excellent basis for informed conversations with the employee to plan RTW.

Classifying jobs into general categories is often a first step to understanding

an employee's activities at work, such as the amount of weight they need to lift or the amount of sitting or walking at the worksite. The Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT)¹ by the U.S. Department of Labor is commonly used to classify jobs.

This standardized occupational information was first published in 1939 to support job placement activities and contained information on more than 17,500 jobs categorized into 550 occupational groups. The most recent version (the 4th edition) was published in 1977, with the last update occurring in 1991. Needless to say, jobs, titles, and their associated activities have changed significantly since then.

Job Classification Tools

In an effort to update the DOT and add new information, the Social Security Administration has partnered with the Bureau of Labor Statistics since 2012 to develop a new platform for occupational information, called the Occupational Information System (OIS).² The OIS is projected to utilize a variety of databases and include basic mental and cognitive requirements of work, with updates planned every five years. Although these agencies have invested considerable time and money on this project — \$180 million from 2012 to 2020 — there is currently no expected publication date due to policy-related setbacks.³

If you are eagerly awaiting the release of this new tool, you can access some of the data being used to build the OIS. The Bureau of Labor Statistics annually surveys employers for the Occupational Requirements Survey.⁴ This survey reports on job-related physical demands, environmental workplace influences, vocational education, training, and experience, and the cognitive requirements of work. The ORS began in 2015 and published data on 397 general job types in 2019, which were informed by more than 26,500 establishments and accounted for 90% of workers in the U.S. economy.

Another data source is the Occupational Information Network (O*NET),⁵ which has standardized and occupation-specific descriptors on more than 1,100 occupations and is regularly updated. O*NET provides an overview of job tasks, knowledge, skills, abilities, work activities, wages, and much more. Additionally, O*NET provides codes for occupational classifications from different branches of the military. O*NET information is available via their website⁵ or as an application programming interface (API).

Another data source that classifies occupations and provides information about job types is the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC).⁶ SOC started in 1977 and is updated with Bureau of Labor Statistics' annual occupational surveys. Workers are classified into 867 detailed occupations with similar job

duties, skills, education, and/or training.

Using the Data

O*NET, DOT, ORS, and SOC each contain slightly different information but are often used together.

Whereas O*NET provides a wide breadth of information about occupations, it does not include job class (e.g., sedentary, light, medium, heavy, or very heavy work), which is still a cornerstone of disability management. Therefore, some disability management tools provide job titles based on the O*NET occupational search to quickly provide the relevant job type along with job class from DOT. To do this, a process called “crosswalking” matches the nearly 18,000 job types in DOT to the most similar jobs within O*NET, which uses far more general codes for their 1,100 job types.

For example, DOT lists the occupation of “tennis ball cover cementer,” which involves spreading cement on rolls of felt used to cover tennis balls. This job description is very specific, likely not as common now as it was in 1991, and falls into the light job class. In O*NET, this occupation is reclassified as a “production worker,” and the crosswalking process would carry over the light work classification from DOT. However, not all of DOT easily fits into O*NET. Data analysts conducting this crosswalking may also need to consider job descriptions and job groupings for missing job titles to provide a job class.

Although O*NET is a significant update from DOT, available tools are not perfect and major challenges remain in classifying jobs. For example, an “environmental epidemiologist” (the closest to my own job title) is classified as light work in DOT. But I can attest that my job should probably be considered sedentary, whereas actual environmental epidemiologists trekking through rural communities could be classified as having heavy work.

Case managers should ask the employee questions to confirm job class and understand that jobs can be highly variable. Job classification is a starting point for care providers and case managers to recommend RTW tasks and goals. Using additional details from O*NET, and eventually OIS, on specific jobs may help people get back to work with accommodations or back to activity more quickly.

Beyond Physical Exertion at Work

Disability management thought leaders have also questioned the value of using broad classifications, which do not consider job-specific functional requirements that may affect length of disability. For example, a nurse may have a light job classification, defined as being able to lift a 20-pound box, but with a diagnosis of carpal tunnel syndrome the amount of



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hand dexterity required may be more predictive of length of disability than lifting ability.

And what about mental health claims? Mental health conditions, notably depressive and anxiety disorders, are on the rise — especially in the COVID-19 era. Research has found that clinicians have difficulty describing work assessments for mental health disorders because the ability to work is affected by both the diagnosis/symptoms and non-medical factors such as environmental and psychosocial issues.⁷

Job classification focuses on physical abilities, not on cognitive function or interpersonal skills. As technology jobs and work-from-home positions continue to drive much of the U.S. job market, the sedentary job class is likely to grow. But how much information can be gained from this classification when considering mental health and ability to perform well in mentally straining and draining positions?

In 2009, an expert panel advised the Social Security Administration that individual differences in cognitive performance strongly predict occupational attainment and often predict work outcomes better than symptoms or severity for psychiatric conditions. To improve the available disability models, the panel recommended including information on neurocognitive functioning, initiative and persistence, interpersonal functioning,

and self-management. Currently these ability types are measured by performance, such as individual tests of IQ, attention, and memory.⁸

O*NET provides information about the skills and abilities necessary for jobs, so it may help case managers better understand the cognitive demands required by a job. Adding cognitive abilities to evaluations for RTW could support productivity by tailoring strategies to decrease extended or reoccurring leaves that may be preventable. Some RTW strategies specific to mental health conditions may include outlining accomplishable tasks, minimizing potential stressors (e.g., lighting, distractions, level of supervision), and removing non-essential tasks.⁹

As the job market continues to change

Telehealth continued from p. 10

The American Psychiatric Association has noted that telehealth no-show rates are significantly lower than those for face-to-face appointments, and medication compliance is improved, resulting in reduced risk of inpatient admissions.¹⁷

The Bottom Line

With telehealth continuing to prove its viability, the question is not “will it grow?” but “which telehealth strategies will produce the greatest payoff for your organization and employees?” Telehealth can help people resolve transient mental health events sooner, move more quickly from diagnosis to treatment, and more successfully manage ongoing mental health conditions.

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and our knowledge about the impact of job-specific requirements expands, we need to continue to support modified or transitional duty to help employees get back to work, in line with clinician recommendations. Advancements in job classification tools can help case managers better understand all types of jobs and provide shortcuts to pertinent information. It's worth taking the time to explore how these tools fit into your workflow to broaden your knowledge about the relationship between work and health.

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