

Assessment of the “Making It Work” Program

Presented to: Eastern District of Wisconsin United States Probation Office

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Making It Work: Assessment

Introduction

We were engaged by the U.S. Probation Service, Eastern District of Wisconsin, to provide an assessment of “Making It Work,” an employment effort implemented across four sessions during 2010/2011 by personnel from the Eastern District. This assessment is integral to the larger purpose of assisting personnel of the Eastern District in assessing this and other efforts as part of evidence-based decision making for the District.

We based this assessment on examination of data relevant to the implementation of the “Making It Work” curriculum and data relevant to employment outcomes of probationers who completed the employment effort and data relevant to employment of probationers assigned to comparison groups who did not participate in the employment effort. We also conducted interviews of three agents whom we identified as accounting for a disparate number of probationers obtaining employment across participant and comparison groups.

In this assessment report we present background on the employment effort, findings and discussion of findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Background

“Making It Work” is a packaged curriculum. Personnel from the Eastern District utilized this curriculum as the core of an employment effort (program) implemented across four sessions (March 15-31, 2010; July 26-August 3, 2011; October 25-29, 2010;

January 7-14, 2011). Each of the four sessions was conducted by a different lead instructor, and the elements of each session surrounding the core curriculum (supplemental content and/or activities) varied.

Personnel from the Eastern District designed and implemented the employment effort to include participant groups and comparison groups. Agents assigned probationers from their caseloads to either participant groups or comparison groups across the four sessions. Agents used their discretion to determine which probationers to assign to the groups; there were no explicit, formal criteria.

Overall, 45 probationers participated in the employment effort, with 45 completing, and 43 probationers comprised the comparison groups (see findings). Seven agents had probationers in participant and comparison groups.

Methods

The methods we employed included the following:

- I. Examination of (a) demographic, offense, and casework data on probationers involved; (b) employment outcome data on probationers involved; and (c) data resulting from exit survey of probationers involved (survey designed and conducted by personnel of the Eastern District). Personnel of the Eastern District collected and provided these data. We requested supplemental data for (a) above. Personnel of the Eastern District collected and provided the supplemental data.
- II. Interviews of three agents. We conducted semi-structured interviews of three agents who accounted for a disparate number of probationers employed across participant and comparison groups.

Findings

*Table 1: Participant Characteristics by Group**

	Making It Work Group (N = 45)	Comparison Group (N = 43)
Gender		
Male	42	39
Female	3	4
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	32	31
White	10	9
Hispanic	3	2
Education		
No High School	16	13
GED	23	18
High School	6	12
Offense Characteristics		
Drug	22	19
Weapon	14	11
Violence	6	5
Fraud	0	5
Prior Employment Status		
Not Employed Prior to Program	43	34
Employed Prior to Program	2	9

Continuous Variables		
RPI	6.18	6.29
Age	35.73	36.63

* Some discrepancies exists between cell totals due to missing data

The characteristics of the participants in the “Making It Work” group and the comparison group are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the groups were fairly comparable for most of the characteristics examined. The majority in both groups was male, Black, had a GED, and was convicted of a drug charge. Those in the comparison group had more individuals employed prior to the program (9) than those in the “Making It Work” program (2). The mean RPI was 6.18 for the “Making It Work” group and 6.29 for the comparison group. The mean age in the comparison group was slightly older than the mean age in the “Making It Work” group. It should also be noted that the comparison group had twice as many individuals with a high school diploma, which could impact their employability.

Examination of employment rates across levels of education reveals that 11 (38%) of those without a high school education did not find employment, 14 (34%) with a GED did not find employment and two (11%) with a high school diploma did not find employment. For current employment, 16 (57%) without a high school education, 22 (54%) with a GED, and seven (39%) with a high school diploma were not currently employed. This indicates that those with a high school diploma had the lowest rate of unemployment, followed by those with a GED and those with no high school education.

If the results are restricted to “Making It Work” participants, eight (50%) with no high school, five with a GED (22%) and zero with a high school diploma failed to find a

job. For currently employment, eight (50%) without a high school education, nine with a GED (39%), and three (50%) with a high school diploma were not currently working. In the comparison group, three (23%) without a high school education, nine (50%) with a GED and 2 (17%) with a high school diploma never found employment. For current employment in the comparison group, eight (62%) with no high school education, 13 with a GED (72%) and four (33%) with a high school diploma were currently not working. Consistent across both groups, those with a high school diploma were more successful in finding employment.

Table 2: Making It Work (N = 45) and Comparison Group (N = 43) Employment Results

	Making It Work Group (N = 45)	Comparison Group (N = 43)
Not Currently Employed	20	25
Currently Employed	24	18
Never Obtained Employment	13	14
Obtained Employment	32	29
Average Days Employed after Completion of the Program	175.78	147.33
Hourly Wage		
Average	\$8.75	\$10.18
Minimum	\$7.25	\$7.25
Maximum	\$15.00	\$16.00
Number of Jobs Held		
Average	1.16	1.48
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	3	4

Individuals Revoked	2	7

* Some discrepancies exists between cell totals due to missing data

As presented in Table 2, examinations of the Making It Work Group (MIW) and the comparison group show that 32 of the “Making It Work” participants obtained employment after the program, with 24 of the 32 still currently employed. For the Comparison group, 29 obtained employment and 18 of the 29 are currently employed. The “Making It Work” participants worked an average of 28 days longer than the comparison group. Comparison of wages indicates that the comparison group made a higher hourly wage than those in the “Making It Work” group. On average the employed “Making It Work” participants held fewer jobs than those in the comparison group. For revocation rates, two individuals in the “Making It Work” group were revoked. One individual who was revoked had been employed and the other had not found employment. For the comparison group, seven were revoked. Of the seven, two had found employment and five had not. None of the differences between the two groups were statistically significant.

Table 3: Making It Work Session Comparisons (N = 45)

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Never Obtained Employment	3	3	3	4
Obtained Employment	8	8	7	9
Not Currently Employed	3	8	5	5
Currently Employed	8	3	5	8

Because variations existed in the facilitation of the “Making It Work” sessions, outcomes for each of the sessions also were examined (presented in Table 3). For the “Making It Work” participants, those in the first group, had the best employment outcomes with eight of eleven obtaining employment and being currently employed. The second group also had eight of eleven participants obtain employment at some point; however, only three are currently employed. In the third group, seven of ten obtained employment with five still employed. The fourth group had nine of thirteen participants obtain employment with eight still employed.

Outcomes by Officer

Examination of employment rates by officer showed that three officers accounted for a high rate of individuals who were able to obtain employment. These three officers accounted for over half of the “Making It Work” participants who obtained employment (18 of the 32). The first officer (JLH) had four individuals in the control group find employment and four not find employment; however, current rates showed that none of the four who obtained employment were employed. For “Making It Work” participants, JLH had eight find employment and one not find employment; of the eight that had obtained employment four were still employed. Six of JRS’s comparison group individuals found employment and two did not. Of the six, five were still employed. In the “Making It Work” group, five of JRS’s participants found employment and three did not. Four of the five remained employed. Of three comparison group members, MJR had zero that were employed. Of his “Making It Work” participants, however, five obtained employment and zero did not. All five remained employed.

Because these three officers accounted for over half of the successful “Making It Work” participants, we conducted face-to-face interviews with each officer. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about 15-20 minutes each. During the interviews we asked the officers the following five questions: 1) How did you choose the participants for the MIW group? How did you choose comparison group participants? 2) Were you a MIW instructor? 3) Did you provide any additional job training or programming for those in the MIW group? How about for those in the comparison group? 4) Do you put any special emphasis on employment? 5) Do you offer any special incentives for individuals who obtain employment?

The interview with JLH revealed that she chose individuals for the “Making It Work” group who were moderate to high risk and who were either highly motivated or had high compliance issues. JLH chose comparison group members after choosing the program and matched them on risks. JLH had been an instructor for session number three. She also reported that the only additional thing she did for those who participated in the “Making It Work” program was to revisit the curriculum. In addition, their participation in the program sometimes led to additional discussions. She also had more regular communication with those individuals because they were at the office daily for the program. JLH indicated that she does not place a special emphasis on employment. Instead, she approaches it on a case-by-case basis depending on the needs of the individual under supervision. Her personal approach to employment is to engage in role playing and to call employers if she has an individual who will be a good match for an

open position. The only incentives for obtaining employment are reduced reporting and a personal sense of accomplishment.

In selecting probationers for “Making It Work” group, JRS looked for history of lacking employment (chronically unemployed), being unemployed at the time of assignment, no violations within 30-60 days, and no mental health issues. For the comparison group, JRS looked at RPI’s and also at whether the persons might not be able to complete the MIW curriculum due to school or GED coursework underway, treatment underway, or already being engaged in temporary work. JRS was lead instructor for one MIW session and helped out with mock interviews for other sessions. JRS reported not giving special attention to the employment group participants; however, JRS provided incentives across participant and comparison groups for employment: (1) for employment lasting more than a year, early release possibility, and (2) discussion of less restrictive supervision if employed (“see me less each month...”). JRS assumed other agents do the same but did not know whether that would be accurate.

In selecting probationers for “Making It Work,” MJR stated that criteria were informal, so, “needing skills was basic...,” and having confidence those selected “would show, follow through...” For the comparison groups, MJR could not recall the basis for selection. MJR did not instruct in “Making It Work”. MJR gave no particular assistance to those in MIW. MJR did provide incentives across participant and comparison groups: (1) putting special emphasis on employment and explaining the collateral benefits, (2) having probationers keep job search/activity logs, and (3) offering reduced reporting and reduced drug test frequency for employment. MJR stated “not all agents do as I do...”

that there is an individual (officer) component to supervision, that there is nothing to tell an agent what to do in this regard, and that not everything works with every client.

The three officers we interviewed accounted for a high proportion of those employed across participant and comparison groups. The commonalities among these agents emerging from the interviews include: (1) all three emphasized employment across both groups (as a matter of usual practice), and (2) all three offered incentives for employment, from reduced reporting to multiple incentives.

There is evidence to suggest the “Making It Work” program is more effective in increasing employment among participants than is reflected in the comparisons with the non-treatment group. It appears that selection bias was present in the selection of the “Making It Work” participants. Prior to the program, only two of the participants were employed compared to nine individuals in the comparison group. Also, more of the comparison group participants than the “Making It Work” participants had a high school diploma. Examination of employment rates by education showed that those with a high school diploma were more successful in obtaining employment. Therefore, it appears that the comparison group was in a better position to obtain employment than those in the “Making It Work” group. Furthermore, in most instances, officers indicated that those they chose to be in the “Making It Work” program were more in need of the program than those chosen to be in the comparison.

Conclusions

The data indicate that the “Making It Work” curriculum could be an important element in probationers’ employment. There were no significant differences between

participant and comparison groups. But, the quantity of the data was relatively small. It is noteworthy that the participants were selected because they had histories of unemployment. Yet a substantial number of the participants obtained employment following their sessions. The data lead us to conclude that it would be worthwhile to continue the employment effort for another year (at least four more sessions), with an altered design for assessment. The aim would be to have sufficient data for a decision to continue, modify, or terminate the effort, based on more extensive evidence.

It is also noteworthy that a substantial number of those in the comparison groups obtained employment while on probation. Agents did not closely match the persons assigned to the comparison groups with those in the participant groups. There may have been enough difference to mask effects of the employment effort. If the District continues “Making It Work,” with careful attention to selection of those assigned to the groups (i.e., explicit formal criteria for assignment by agents) the continuing assessment can support more precise determination of the possibility of differences attributable to the effort.

Three agents supervised caseloads accounting for a disparate number of those (both in participant and comparison groups) obtaining employment. Our interviews with these agents revealed that they appear to approach employment differently than other agents. These agents offer incentives for employment and focus on employment as a matter of usual practice. Their attention to employment likely mediated the outcomes of the participant/comparison group design. If the District continues “Making it Work,” with careful attention to structuring the focus of all agents assigning persons to groups

and with a uniform approach to incentives across all involved agents, the continuing assessment can support a more precise determination of the effects of the effort.

Recommendations

Based on the data, we recommend the following:

1. The District should continue to implement “Making It Work for at least one more year, preferably two years. This would allow for development of data sufficient to make a determination of the effects of the effort.

2. If the District continues “Making It Work,” the leadership team should modify the assessment design to provide for more precise determination of the effects of the effort.

The team should develop explicit formal criteria for selection of those in participant and comparison groups to be utilized by all agents involved. Agents should identify persons who meet these criteria, and the leadership team should assign these persons to the MIW or comparison groups (random assignment would be ideal, in which case the term “control group” would have more meaning). The leadership team should require a consistent approach across agents concerning use of incentives and degree of focus on employment. The team should modify the survey administered to probationers to provide more useful relevant data.

3. The leadership team should utilize independent evaluators to assist in modifying the assessment design and in conducting the assessment. If the District continues “Making It Work,” the leadership team should work with evaluators from the decision to continue and throughout continued implementation.

4. The leadership team should develop an assessment template, building ton the assessment of “Making It Work” as a foundation for assessments of other efforts undertaken and underway.