**Opinion**

Occupational therapists can play a major role in the work rehabilitation process through the assessment and rehabilitation of clients for a return to work (Gibson and Strong 2003). The challenge facing the occupational therapist is identifying if the client’s current functional abilities are a suitable match for the demands of the job. Ideally, the occupational therapist should assess the demands of the job that the client is required to perform as well as completing an assessment of the client’s work abilities. The purpose of this opinion piece is to highlight to occupational therapists the importance of job analysis in all specialties within vocational rehabilitation and to illustrate the process used by the occupational therapists in the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Service.

---

**The Importance of Job Analysis in Occupational Therapy**

*Malcolm Joss*

**Introduction**

Barnes and Holmes (2007) report that, in recent years, work rehabilitation issues have ceased to be central to occupational therapy practice, and that occupational therapists in the United Kingdom currently have little experience of dealing with work rehabilitation. However, occupational therapists have most of the necessary skills required for work rehabilitation. The skills required for job analysis are a natural extension of the skills that occupational therapists use in activity analysis.

**Activity analysis**

Activity analysis is a core skill in occupational therapy. It involves the identification of the demands of the activity and of the skills required to perform it (Lamport et al 1996). The goal of activity analysis is to understand as much about an activity as possible (Crepeau et al 2003). This can include identifying the equipment, tools and materials required for the activity as well as the environmental and social demands of the task. The correct identification of these factors allows the occupational therapist to determine what the rehabilitation programme needs to address and to establish clear treatment goals that help the client to be able to perform the activity. Activity analysis can identify what aspects of the activity can be therapeutic and can suggest suitable adaptations and modifications (Lamport et al 1996).

**Job analysis**

A job analysis is a systematic approach to identify and describe the demands that a job places on a worker. It can be used to help managers in many different and useful ways. These can include recruitment, redeployment of workers, vocational rehabilitation, retirement planning, training and vocational counselling (United States Department of Labor [US DOL] 1991). A job description is not a job analysis. A job description only describes the functions of a job and how it relates to other jobs in the workplace; it only lists the work that is done. A job analysis can include the activities that the worker performs; how the work is performed; the outcomes, services or materials produced; the skills and aptitudes that the worker requires to perform the job; and the environment in which the work is performed (King 1998, Havranek et al 1999).

**Occupational therapy and job analysis**

A job analysis is an important first step in the occupational therapist making himself or herself familiar with the demands that a job places on a client. Performed at the early stages
of a client’s rehabilitation, it can help to identify those treatment objectives that will need to be set to equip the client with the skills required to perform the job (Canelon 1995, Crepeau et al 2003). It brings the occupational therapist into the workplace and plays a valuable initial role in engaging and involving the employer in the process, allowing the employer to understand what is involved. The employer has a central role to play in achieving a successful return to work for an employee and the vital role that employers play in the work rehabilitation process cannot be over-emphasised (Loisel et al 1997).

**Functional capacity evaluation and job analysis**

Several authors stress the importance of analysing the demands of a job as a key component of work rehabilitation and state that without such an analysis, the validity of a functional assessment and treatment recommendations is threatened (Canelon 1995, King et al 1998, Innes and Straker 2002, Gibson and Strong 2003, Pransky and Dempsey 2004).

A functional capacity evaluation (FCE) is the method most commonly used to assess ill or injured employees’ suitability for work and, historically, occupational therapists have used functional assessments to determine capacity for work (Gibson and Strong 2003). Combined with an FCE, a job analysis is a powerful tool in determining a client’s suitability for a job (King 1998). This combination ‘brings objectivity … into a work injury process that has been subjective’ (Toeppen-Sprigg 2000, p.137).

An FCE is a one-off evaluation used in occupational rehabilitation to help to determine the work-related abilities of a client who is ill or injured (Gibson and Strong 1997). It is not an assessment of an individual’s medical condition, but does consider the influence of the medical condition on his or her work abilities (Lyth 2001). As occupational therapists, we are concerned with assessing the occupational performance of an individual (Mathiowetz 1993). In work rehabilitation, this focuses our attention more on the client’s ability to do the job and less on measuring the extent of the impairment caused by the medical condition.

A job analysis and FCE alone will not be sufficient to provide the occupational therapist with information about the client’s suitability to perform a job. Several authors identify the importance of addressing the full range of factors that can influence work performance (Velozo 1993, Gibson and Strong 1998, Linton and Hallden 1998, Schonstein and Kenny 2001). The assessments can address such factors as activities of daily living functioning, psychosocial influences on work, coping with pain, measurements of physical abilities, assessment of work behaviours and aptitudes, and occupational preferences. Psychosocial factors can play a significant role in influencing a client’s ability to perform his or her work duties (Kendall et al 1997, Gibson and Strong 1998). By addressing all these factors, the occupational therapist can generate valuable data to determine a client’s suitability to perform specific work duties.

**Work rehabilitation programmes**

If the evidence of the job analysis, FCE and other assessments indicates that the client is suitable for a return to work, the client’s rehabilitation moves to the return-to-work phase. A return-to-work programme may help to bridge the gap between the client’s absence from work and re-entering and remaining in the workplace.

Return-to-work programmes include such components as grading the hours worked; educating the client on managing his or her medical condition in the workplace; work conditioning (learning, improving skills, and improving physical and mental ability to carry out work tasks); advice on good biomechanics for work activities; advice on alternative methods for performing work duties; advice on workplace modifications; and on-site support and review (Helm et al 1999, Durand and Loisel 2001, Haldorsen et al 2002, Skouen et al 2002). Without a job analysis to bring a clear understanding of the demands of the job, the work environment and the attitude of the employer, the occupational therapist will be unable to provide recommendations that are practical or constructive.

**The role of job analysis in OHSAS**

In the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Service (OHSAS) in the National Health Service Fife, a job analysis is typically used to gather information about a job that a client is being asked to perform. This may be his or her current job or proposed alternative duties. This is conducted prior to an evaluation of the client’s functional capacities. The information from the job analysis and the functional evaluation will help to determine the client’s suitability for the work duties. The job analysis does not require the client to be present at work, because this may influence the therapist’s ability to gather objective and reliable information. The job analysis involves an interview with workers who are familiar with the job and direct observation of the work activities. It is emphasised to both the employer and employee that the purpose of the visit is not to discuss the client’s situation.

At the start of the analysis interview, the occupational therapist gathers information about the significant features of the job: hours, shift patterns, processes, cycles of work, tasks, tools and equipment used, hazards, manual handling elements and clerical tasks performed. The interview then proceeds to the analysis. The job analysis tool used by occupational therapists in OHSAS is the Valpar Profile Analysis Guide (VPAG) (Valpar 1993), which is a standardised job analysis tool. Any job can be analysed using the VPAG in combination with the Revised Handbook for Analysing Jobs (RHAJ) (US DOL 1991).

The RHAJ describes the methodology and the information that needs to be gathered to analyse a job. It provides the categories used in job analysis as well as the scales used to measure the degree to which a factor or skill is required by the job. Each of the categories contains several factors and the object of the analysis is to allocate a
value to each factor. The RHAJ lists examples of skill levels or work situations for each factor to help the occupational therapist in assigning the relevant value. It is a qualitative tool, relying on a synthesis of technical data, descriptive information, observation and professional judgement for allocating the values. The VPAG simply provides a form to organise and record the information produced by the analysis.

Once the analysis is complete, the occupational therapist will usually go and observe workers performing the duties. Observation is valuable because it helps the occupational therapist to appreciate the environmental factors: heat, noise, light, and the presence of hazards. It also provides the occupational therapist with an opportunity to identify those duties or tasks that may be open to modification. The job analysis is usually scheduled for a date that is 48 hours prior to any functional evaluation of an employee. There can be situations when a job analysis is completed after a functional evaluation; for example, when the employer has identified an alternative job for the employee and it needs to be determined if the employee is suitable for it.

Conclusion

Job analysis is an essential skill in work rehabilitation and, historically, occupational therapists have used activity analysis to understand the interaction between a client and a task. Job analysis is not exclusive to occupational therapists working with clients with physical disabilities. It is appropriate for all occupational therapists engaged in work rehabilitation. The information provided by a job analysis assists the occupational therapist in developing treatment programmes. Combining a job analysis with assessments that address the client’s activities of daily living functioning, psychosocial influences on work and functional capacities gives the occupational therapist a unique perspective on the client and his or her work performance, enabling the occupational therapist to determine a client’s suitability to perform specific work duties.

References


