

Diagnosis of vocational competency of women with career interruptions and measures to support their career re-establishment

Eun-jin Oh

Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

Abstract

The goal of this research was to develop an objective vocational capacity assessment tool, with an aim of helping women with career interruptions to identify the true level of their vocational preparedness compared to the standards required in their preferred occupation and then resume their course of continuous career development by establishing a personalized career development plan. A pilot testing was conducted in order to examine the validity and reliability of the diagnostic tools and make modifications if necessary. Then, a user manual for the diagnostic tool was created in order to enable individual women to design their own customized career development plans by comparing their current vocational competency with the competencies required in the labor market, as well as with the competencies of women who experienced career interruptions but are currently employed in a related area. Next, based on the outcomes of the diagnosis, suggestions were offered to career development assistants and job consultants at the center on ways to enhance the efficacy of the support provided to their clients. Finally, policy measures were suggested for the government in regards to assisting women with interrupted career paths.

Keywords: Diagnosis of vocational competency, Assessment tool, Career interruption, Career re-establishment, Personalized career development plan

1. Research goals and necessity

The labor market participation of South Korean women rose steadily from the country's

independence from Japan until 1990, spurred by the growth in the national economy that began in the 1960s. However, it has remained stagnant over the past decade following the weathering of the Asian financial crisis. The educational gap between men and women has narrowed, with women's educational attainment growing significantly along with the country's economic development. However, women's economic participation and the quality of their jobs have not advanced to the same degree. Such results can be attributed to the career interruption of women and insufficient opportunities for career development.

The South Korean government introduced the Act on the Promotion of the Economic Activities of Career-interrupted Women in 2008 in recognition of women's career discontinuity being not a matter of personal choice, but rather a socially structured issue. In accordance with this basic framework, the reemployment support center (hereinafter "the center") was established in February 2009. This one-stop employment support center provides services ranging from group consultations to employment referral and vocational training for women with interrupted careers.

While the economic participation of women in their 40s or over has increased remarkably through such government support, there are few desirable jobs available to them, with a great number of these women working in irregular positions or in the restaurant/hotel/sales service industries. Such a trend reflects the reality in which women with five- to ten-year career interruptions experience great difficulty in securing desirable employment. Efforts are required to provide them with professional counseling and vocational training from the very beginning of their job search in order to allow them opportunities to find better jobs and encourage them to continue their career development in the labor market. In addition, post-employment monitoring is required to provide assistance to female workers on a continual basis.

The enhancement of professional counseling and employment referral service at the center hinges upon the cultivation of professional career development assistants and employment consultants. Also needed are tools to assess women's vocational competency in an objective manner, the results of which can be used as proof of their qualifications in the labor market.

The goal of this research is to develop an objective vocational capacity assessment tool, with an aim of helping women with career discontinuity to identify the true level of their vocational preparedness compared to the standards required in their preferred occupation and then resume their course of continuous career development by establishing a personalized career development plan.

2. Research process

First, the previous literature was accessed in order to ascertain the need for objective vocational capacity diagnosis of women who have experienced career interruption, as well as for support for their sustainable career development in the labor market.

Second, the current status, challenges, and points for improvement of employment support services provided at the center were examined together with the impact of the center's vocational programs on women's career development.

Third, a tool was developed to more accurately diagnose the vocational competency of women with interrupted career paths. Considering that the only data available for demonstrating the competencies of the women involved is self-reported competency descriptions in their job application forms, the two most successful areas of employment among these clients were selected for development of a diagnostic tool. Next, pilot testing was conducted in order to further improve the tool.

Fourth, a user manual for the diagnostic tool was created in order to enable individual women to design their own customized career development plans by comparing their current vocational competency with the competencies required in the labor market, as well as with the competencies of women who experienced career interruptions but are currently employed in a related area.

Fifth, based on the outcomes of the diagnosis, suggestions were offered to career development assistants and job consultants at the center on ways to enhance the efficacy of the support provided to their clients. In addition, this research suggested training improvement measures able to complement the existing programs with missing elements in the development of women's systematic improvement of competence.

Finally, policy measures were suggested for the government in regards to assisting women with interrupted career paths.

3. The implications of vocational capacity diagnosis in an era of life-long learning

The transition to a knowledge-intensive society casts doubt upon the efficacy of the curriculum-based knowledge currently featured in school systems. The development of information

technology has enabled knowledge exchange on a massive scale, as well as the emergence of new knowledge and innovation. Rather than simply accumulating knowledge or technology, individuals are now required to be able to select and apply knowledge called for by a specific situation. Against this backdrop, the concept of core competencies, which refers to the ability to act efficiently in given situations, has emerged and a variety of countries have been making efforts to identify and develop their core competencies. The core competencies identified by the OECD, which has served as a basis for other countries' exploration of their respective competencies, is one of the examples of the elements of core competency required in our current era.

As part of this process, the paradigm of learning has been evolving into the concept of lifelong education. Learning, which had been limited to the conventional school system (elementary school to university), is now required across the course of one's entire life. As the concept of guaranteed lifetime employment erodes, individuals need to be engaged in continuous learning focused on the cultivation of multifunctionality, knowledge-labor skills, and innovation.

This process of transition is taking place in the market for women's labor. With South Korea passing from the era of agriculture to industrialization and now to a knowledge-based information society, the rate of women's economic participation rose along with their educational attainment until it began to decline in the 2000s. Despite levels of education comparable to those of their counterparts in more industrialized countries, career interruption among highly educated South Korean women continues to be an issue. Marriage and childbirth/childrearing have been blamed for the bulk of career interruptions. The longer women remain outside the workplace, the more diminished is the effect of the education and skills that the women possess.

One of the reasons that women with an extended period of non-employment find it difficult to resume working is in the differences in the nature of the core competencies and work tools required before and after their career interruption; the longer the period, the wider becomes the gap. In the case of a woman who has been out of the job market for ten or more consecutive years, for example, unlike a decade ago when a fairly basic level of computer skills was needed, she is now required to demonstrate confident use of a broad range of information and communications technologies. If the period of non-working is as long as 20 years, there will be a much greater gap between the competencies required back in the country's industrial era and those in the present information society. In order to make a successful reentry into the labor market, women need to bridge the gap.

In this regard, the following two considerations need to be taken into account by women who desire to reenter the labor market.

First, the needs of a knowledge-based society should be clearly identified. Those with career interruptions are likely to not be fully aware of the core competencies required in a new job due to the evolution of the labor market over their non-working period. Hence, it is essential to refresh their knowledge on the core competencies required in today's society.

Second, the transition to a new era is altering the learning paradigm as well. Individuals are required to engage in ongoing learning. What is important now is not the amount of knowledge with which one is equipped, but rather the ability to respond successfully to the complex demands of a specific situation. One of the reasons that the effects of the skills and knowledge that a woman held in the past fade over time is related to the diminishing value of accumulated knowledge. Continuous learning is essential for the development of personal competencies.

4. Status and necessity of vocational competency assessment for women with interrupted career paths

As of 2011, the number of women aged 25-64 years old with interrupted career paths amounts to 2.9 million, or a remarkable 72.3% of the unemployed women in this age group. Major causes of career discontinuity include marriage, childbirth/childrearing, and home management. Among these women, 83.0% were absent from the job market for at least one year.

As to their pre-interruption jobs, the proportion of occupations related to social welfare, accounting, and simple clerical work was highest. Meanwhile, the preferred jobs among such women as they reenter the labor force were accounting and clerical work. The proportion of clerical work training was also high in vocational training programs for women with interrupted career paths.

Six out of ten career development assistants/job consultants at the center agree that in many cases, women's preferred jobs and their vocational competencies fail to match. This necessitates a vocation-competency diagnosis for clients.

According to a survey of career development assistants/job consultants at the center, 75% were in agreement regarding the necessity of a vocational competency diagnostic tool. As to the reason, 62.1% pointed to the need to provide customized service based on the level of competence. In other words, the center is failing to do this.

As described above, this research has confirmed the need for a tool to diagnose the vocational competency of women suffering career interruptions. Based on the size of the population of women with such interruptions, pre-interruption occupation, preferred post-interruption occupation, and the vocational training offered them, clerical jobs and special education assistants were selected as areas of priority that need a diagnosis tool.

5. Development of a vocational competency diagnostic tool

1) Development of a tool for clerical work

The core competencies, required competencies, and specific skills needed for clerical work were identified as including cognitive skills-work management-accounting/tax laws/general clerical management; cognitive and mathematical skills-OA (office automation)-accounting/taxation laws/general clerical management; communication skills-document comprehension and production; problem-solving-situational response; and interpersonal relations skills-teamwork skills. A Delphi survey was performed four times in order to assess the degree of necessity of each behavioral skill by competency area and the work level for each behavioral skill. A diagnostic tool was developed based on the results of these surveys.

The first Delphi survey was replaced with an expert meeting in order to examine the validity of the core competencies, required competencies, and behavioral skills for each competence. Based on the results of this meeting, a draft version of a diagnosis tool was developed prior to being modified through the second and third Delphi survey of a 20-member expert panel. Based on the results of the previous Delphi surveys, the tool was finalized in a fourth Delphi survey of the same panel members by refining the degree of necessity of each core competency and the required level of each behavioral skill.

The diagnosis tool for clerical work consists of a total of 52 behavioral skills as follows: 18 behavioral skills for cognitive skills-work management-accounting/taxation law/general clerical management; 16 behavioral skills for cognitive and mathematical skills-OA (office automation) ability-accounting/taxation laws/general clerical management; eight behavioral skills for communication ability-document comprehension and production; five behavioral skills for problem-solving ability-situational response ability; and five skills for interpersonal relations-teamwork capabilities.

According to the second to fourth Delphi surveys, the skill levels required for cognitive skills-work management is 3.14; 2.84 for cognitive and mathematical skills-OA (office automation);

3.06 for communication skills-document comprehension and production; 3.10 for problem-solving skills-situational response skills; and 3.50 for interpersonal relations-teamwork skills.

2) Development of a tool for special education assistance

The core competencies, required competencies, and specific skills needed for special education assistance were identified to include cognitive skills-work management; communication-attentive listening/expression of opinions; problem-solving skills-situational response skills; and interpersonal relations-teamwork skills. Four consecutive Delphi surveys were conducted in order to determine the degree of necessity of each competency and the required level of each behavioral skill. A diagnostic tool was developed based on the results of the surveys.

The process of the Delphi surveys was identical to that regarding clerical work. The diagnostic tool developed for special education assistance comprises a total of 51 behavioral skills: eight for cognitive skills-work management; nine for communication-attentive listening/expression of opinions; 20 for problem-solving skills-situational response skills; and 14 for interpersonal relations-teamwork skills.

The skill levels estimated to be required for this type of work is as the following: 3.25 for cognitive skills-work management; 3.33 for communication-attentive listening/expression of opinions; 3.65 for problem-solving-situational response; and 3.43 for interpersonal relations-teamwork.

6. Pilot testing and modification of the tools

1) Goals and procedures of pilot tests

Pilot tests were carried out in order to examine the validity and reliability of the two diagnostic tools and make modifications if necessary.

A total of two pilot tests with clients of three reemployment support centers were conducted regarding the vocational competency diagnosis tool for clerical work. The first test was conducted with 20 recipients of initial job consultations and 20 women who had completed vocational training offered by the center. As the first test failed to identify significant differences between the two groups, another test was carried out with 20 women who had completed the vocational training offered by the center and were engaged in the job search process and

another 20 who had successfully secured employment following such training.

Pilot testing of the tool for special education assistance work was conducted with clients of the reemployment center in City G, the only center providing vocational training for this type of work. The subjects included 20 women who were in the midst of a job search after completing the training and 20 women who had successfully found employment following the training.

2) Pilot testing of the vocational competency diagnostic tool for clerical work

In the first test comparing those who had received initial job consultations and those who had completed job training, in the cognitive skills-work management category a statistically significant difference was identified only in terms of skills related to taxation laws and communication. In the second test comparing those who had completed vocational training and were in the midst of a job search and those who had successfully secured employment following the training, a significant difference was found in relation to work competencies but not regarding interpersonal relations and communication skills. Deciding that a comparison between those who had received initial job consultations and those who had succeeded in securing employment was necessary in order to confirm the validity of the tool, the researchers performed a t-test with the two groups. A significant difference was found in all areas and the diagnostic tool for clerical work was verified to be appropriate for identifying those who require further refining of vocational competence.

In addition, a correlation analysis was performed in order to investigate the associations between the competencies of the two groups. According to the results, the correlations in cognitive skills, cognitive and mathematical skills, and problem-solving skills were high, while interpersonal relations skills showed a low level of correlation. This signifies a need for a different tool for interpersonal relations skills.

3) Pilot testing of the vocational competency diagnostic tool for special education assistance work

Statistical significance was found for all competency skills including cognitive skills, communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal relations between those in the midst of a job search after completing vocational training and those who succeeded in finding a job. Therefore, it can be concluded that each vocational competency is appropriate for the verification of those who have successfully reentered the labor market.

A correlation analysis was conducted in order to examine the relationships between each competency set between the two groups. As a result, the correlations of cognitive skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal relations skills were very high. In other words, those who were considered to have high vocational competency obtained high scores in all four areas while those who were perceived to have low competency achieved low overall scores. Those who hoped to become special education assistants showed a fairly even distribution of vocational competencies.

4) Results of focus group interview

The focus group interview had two goals. First, it was intended to modify and complement as needed the tools through the interpretation of the results of the pilot testing and analysis of the importance of vocational competencies of women with career interruptions both at the point of and following employment. Second, it was designed to examine how the results of the diagnosis can assist women's career development.

Questions with dubious reliability in the pilot tests were discussed at the focus group interview and a total of five questions were deleted through consensus.

7. Use of the diagnostic tools and ways to support women's career re-establishment

The vocational competency diagnostic tools developed for women with interrupted career paths by means of this research can be used, based on the user manual, by career development assistants and job consultants at reemployment support centers

1) Gauging the client's commitment to employment

This project developed questionnaires able to help assess at the initial interview a client's commitment to employment. However, the questions and criteria need to be further refined based on the data on job seekers compiled at individual centers.

Table 1. Methods for use of the questionnaire to diagnose a client’s commitment to employment at an initial interview

Variable	Questions	Methods of use	
		Method 1	Method 2
Commute distance	Are you willing to commute to a job 30 minutes or longer by bus?	Assign 1 point to yes and 0 point to no and calculate the total score to determine the level of commitment to employment e.g.) 5 points or higher: highly committed 3-4 points: relatively committed 1-2 points: minimally committed	Use a 3-point or 5-point scale and calculate the average score to determine the level of commitment to employment
Work hours	Are you willing to work night shifts?		
Overtime work	Are you willing to work overtime twice or more per week?		
Salary	Are you willing to work under the following conditions: 6-day workweek; 9 a.m.-6 p.m. schedule; 1.2 million won per month; 4 major social insurances covered?		
Working conditions	Are you willing to work under the following conditions: part-time position with 5-day workweek and flexible work hours (10 a.m.-5 p.m.)?		
Working environment	Are you willing to take a full-time manufacturing position with a fixed monthly salary?		
Family environment	Are you willing to maintain your employment even if an emergency occurs within your family (e.g. someone falls sick)?		

2) Method of use of the user manual on the vocational competency diagnostic tools

a) Subjects and goals of the tools

- The results of the diagnostic tools developed in this research can be used both by job seekers themselves and by reemployment support centers.
 - Job seekers can assess their own vocational competencies and establish customized development plans based on their areas of strength and weakness.
 - The tools can be used to examine the medium-term progress of a personal career development plan. Job seekers can select specific training able to complement their areas of weakness.
- Career development assistants and job consultants can identify the competencies of individual job seekers based on the diagnosis in order to match them with programs more effective in assisting them in their search for employment.

- The effects of vocational training can be more clearly understood.
- Employment support agencies can more precisely identify the demands of hiring companies.

b) The user manual for the vocational competency diagnostic tools

A. Base scores and reference group scores

The results of the diagnosis can be viewed based on two aspects: base scores, which represent the basic levels of competency in each category required for employment; and reference group scores, which are average scores of those who successfully secured employment.

According to the results of diagnosis, the level of competency that appears to show the greatest potential for employment is when “my score” is located somewhere between the base score and reference group score. If “my score” is within this range in all areas, it is interpreted that the person can be immediately directed to employment.

Table 2 presents the base scores and reference group scores for clerical work.

Table 2. Base scores and reference group scores for clerical work (7-point scale)

Area	Base scores (scores required by employers)	Reference group scores (average scores of those employed in the field)
cognitive skills-work management-accounting	3.1	3.9
cognitive skills-work management-taxation laws	4.0	4.1
cognitive skills-work management-general clerical management	2.3	4.2
cognitive and mathematical skills-OA-accounting	3.2	4.4
cognitive and mathematical skills-OA-taxation laws	3.1	3.9
cognitive and mathematical skills-OA-general clerical management	2.3	5.2
communication ability-document comprehension and production	3.1	4.2

Area	Base scores (scores required by employers)	Reference group scores (average scores of those employed in the field)
problem-solving skills-situational response	3.1	4.4
interpersonal relations-teamwork skills	3.5	5.1
Total	27.7	39.4
Average	3.1	4.4

Table 2 presents the base scores and reference group scores for special education assistant positions

Table 2. Base scores and reference group scores for special education assistant positions (7-point scale)

Area	Base scores (scores required by employers)	Reference group scores (average scores of those employed in the field)
cognitive skills-work management	3.3	4.0
communication-attentive listening	3.3	4.1
problem-solving skills-situational response	3.7	4.4
interpersonal relations-teamwork skills	3.4	4.8
Total	13.7	17.3
Average	3.4	4.3

The manual also includes specific examples on how to map out personalized career paths using the base and reference group scores.

B. Implications of vocational competency diagnosis for women with career interruptions and measures to support their career re-establishment

1) Measures to support career re-establishment

It is difficult to measure the competencies of women with career interruptions either through a test or observation of her behavioral skills. Therefore, it seems most appropriate for the woman herself to evaluate her own behavioral skills and competence.

Figure 1 shows the stages of career development assistance. The dotted line represents where the results of this research will be embedded into policy.

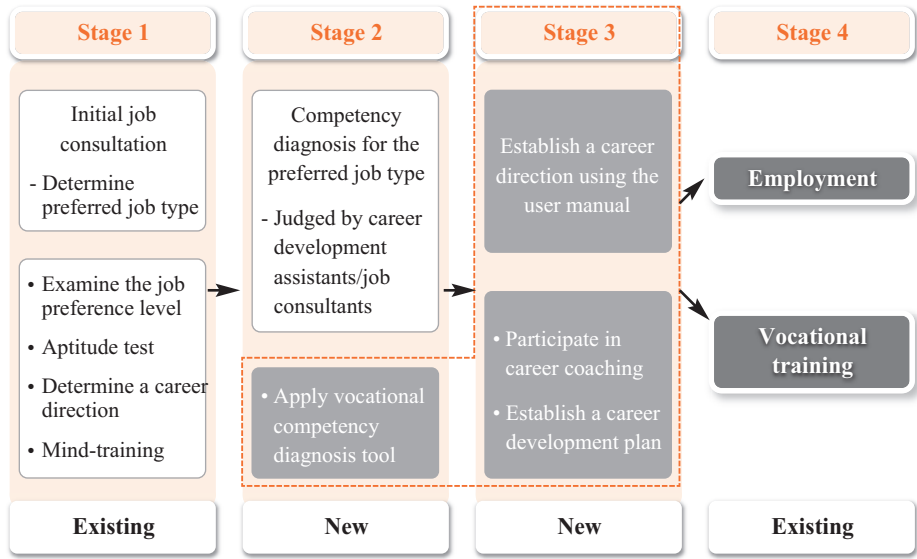


Figure 1. Stages of career development assistance

Figure 1 presents the additions suggested by this research to complement the existing flow of the employment support service offered by reemployment support centers.

The dotted line refers to the part to be complemented based on the findings of this research in order to create a more dynamic employment support system.

One of the characteristics of women with career interruptions lies in the gap between their preferred jobs and the types of employment actually available to them. This gap is a main cause of repeated career interruptions. The diagnostic tool enables job consultants to assess the vocational competency of a woman in a more accurate manner and should be provided with the user manual as a means to help them design a career re-establishment plan.

The user manual needs to define and explain the meanings of the base scores and reference group scores in a way that users can easily understand.

Stage 4 shows the two directions in which job consultants can guide the job seeker: relaying them to a job or to a vocational training course. Currently, these two tracks are determined based upon the request of the client. For more professional career coaching, however, this needs to be performed in a more systematic manner.

For those who have been diagnosed as immediately employable, their career-building efforts need to be supported as follows.

First, job consultants need to accurately identify the competency level of the job seeker and establish a career-building roadmap accordingly.

Second, the personal competencies, prior work experience, and current job preferences of a job seeker need to be fully profiled as part of the initial consultation stage.

Third, the employment support system needs to be revamped in order to assist its beneficiaries on a continual basis from employment to sustainable career-building.

As to those who have been advised to pursue further vocational training, the following support can be provided.

First, job consultants identify the least-competitive aspect of a job seeker and set up a career-building roadmap accordingly. A modular training course is designed by stage and content taking into account the woman's educational attainment, age, length of period of non-employment, and prior work experience. The roles of vocational training coordinators will be critical in this regard.

Second, some of the existing programs may need to be converted into a modular format if a modular vocational program is to be designed for individual women. For those who must begin from a basic level, the program can be linked to the government's vocational training subsidy card (Naeil Baeum Card) to allow the women to enroll in programs from other vocational training institutions based on their respective needs.

Third, a re-education system needs to be developed in order to verify the effectiveness of vocational training. Upon completion of vocational training, job consultants may wish to re-evaluate the individual's competency and recommend a further round of training if it has yet to reach the level necessary for employment.

In this regard, the vocational competency diagnosis tool can provide valuable information both at the initial consultation stage and following the completion of a training course.

2) Policy support measures

This paper has suggested the development of a vocational competency diagnostic tool, the implementation of the results of diagnosis, and measures to support the career re-establishment

efforts of both job seekers and employment support agencies in relation to using the results of diagnosis. The suggestions described above can be further enhanced by the following policy measures.

While this research suggested only two types of the vocational competency diagnostic tool, it can be further developed to cover all jobs especially preferred among women with career interruptions.

The competencies of job consultants should be further improved. The use of the results of the diagnosis and establishment of a career development roadmap can be rely greatly upon the competency of the job consultant no matter how well its user manual is constructed. Therefore, it may be necessary to provide a separate competency development program for job consultants in relation to the use of the diagnostic tool.

The direction of employment support service for women with career interruptions needs to be revised. First, the direction of vocational training should be reviewed. The existing free vocational training programs for women with career interruptions are focused on the total number of training hours. Currently, a basic-level program consists of 80 hours of training, and an average-level program provides 180 hours, while an intensive-level program offers 240 hours. This research suggests a modular program with a reduced number of training hours structured by stage and area based on competency level.

Second, the focus of employment support service needs to be shifted from successful employment to successful career re-establishment. The work of employment support agencies needs to be expanded to include the continuous monitoring of their clients after employment, as well as to the provision of general consultations and consultations for clients facing difficulties at work. Formation of self-support groups can be encouraged and reemployment support centers need financial assistance for developing relevant plans.

The negotiating skills of career development assistants need to be strengthened and changes in the labor market should be reflected. Proactive identification of job openings by career development assistants may lead to changes in the labor market. If they are able to understand the types of work required by the market, negotiate with employers, and introduce to them job seekers with specific profiles of potential employees, they may be able to change the hiring practices in the market and link competent women holding career interruptions to jobs with better working conditions. As to jobs created through public funding, the government needs to provide specific hiring guidelines.