I. Introduction
A. Commencing vocational rehabilitation for an injured worker requires that two documents be prepared, the vocational assessment report and the individual written rehabilitation plan (IWRP). The two are sometimes confused, since the vocational assessment is used together with other information to prepare the IWRP. The two are, however, distinctly different in form and function.
B. The vocational assessment is an overview of the worker’s present status.
C. The IWRP is a roadmap for vocational rehabilitation efforts, which are to begin as soon as the plan is agreed upon.
D. Unfortunately, many plans are so vague that they do not provide any meaningful guidance to the injured worker or to the other parties involved in the case. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate dialogue about ways the rehabilitation plan can be improved, thus improving services to the injured worker.

II. The Vocational Assessment
A. Initial interview
1. Critical for the counselor to listen to the injured worker, and to understand his/her fears regarding the rehabilitation process.
2. The counselor must provide the injured worker with a copy of the Rehabilitation Rules, and be prepared to address the fears and concerns.
B. Rule requirements [taken directly from NCIC RURPWCC III.E.(2)]:
1. The vocational assessment involves a face-to-face interview between the injured worker and the counselor, and includes the counselor’s evaluation of the worker’s:
   a. Social issues
   b. Medical issues
   c. Vocational standing
   d. Other information significant to employment potential
2. The purpose of the evaluation is:
   a. To determine whether the worker can benefit from vocational rehabilitation services, and, if so,
   b. To identify the specific type and sequence of appropriate services.
3. The evaluation should include
   a. An evaluation of the worker's expectations in the rehabilitation process,
   b. An evaluation of any specific requests by the worker for medical treatment or vocational training
   c. A statement of the counselor’s conclusion regarding the worker's need for rehabilitation services, benefits expected from services
   d. A description of the proposed rehabilitation plan.
C. During the vocational assessment phase, the counselor may refer the injured worker for academic testing to assess current skills or may conduct vocational testing him/herself.
D. If, during the assessment, the counselor determines that medical issues are still outstanding, he/she may work with all parties to ensure that additional treatment, testing or physical rehabilitation is secured for the injured worker.

E. Only after the counselor has a clear picture of the injured worker’s skills, abilities, interests and physical status can an individualized plan be developed.

F. Outline for the vocational assessment report; components should include:
1. Purpose of the evaluation
2. Summary of referral records
3. Current medical status of the injured worker, including history of injury, limitations, identification of treating physicians, current treatment
4. Schedule of pending appointments
5. Vocational history, including transferable skills, wages, job duties, re-employment possibilities and DOT numbers of previous jobs
6. Education and specialized training; interests, academic levels, aptitudes
7. Description of local labor market opportunities for similarly qualified persons
8. Conclusion: Will this injured worker benefit from vocational rehabilitation service? Why or why not?

III. The Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan

A. NCIC Rehabilitation Rules requirements
1. *IWRP is required, not optional.*
   a. NCIC RURPWCC III.E.: "Vocational Rehabilitation’ refers to the delivery and coordination of services *under an individualized plan*, with the goal of assisting injured workers to return to suitable employment."
   b. Unless the RP is acting under an IWRP, s/he is not acting under the Rehab Rules.
2. *IWRP is prerequisite to job search.*
   a. NCIC RURPWCC III.E.(3): “Job placement activities may be commenced after completion of a vocational assessment and formulation of an individualized plan for vocational services which specifies its goals and the priority for return-to-work options in each case. "
   b. Job search may not be started before the plan is complete.
3. *IWRP shall guide job search.*
   a. NCIC RURPWCC III.E.(3) (continued): "... Placement shall only be directed toward prospective employers offering the opportunity for suitable employment, as defined herein."
   b. Job search must occur only within the framework of the plan. If, for example, the RP is of the professional opinion (see below) that weekend night clerk at a motel is suitable employment for the injured worker, then the IWRP must be drawn or amended to document and support that judgment.
4. *Professional judgment*
   a. NCIC RURPWCC V.A.: The counselor must exercise independent professional judgment in making and documenting recommendations for medical and vocational rehabilitation for the injured worker.
   b. Professional judgment must not only be used, but its use must be documented. That is, the IWRP must contain reasons for its choices and recommendations.
5. **Mandatory IWRP subjects**
   
a. NCIC RURPWCC III.E.2. “It should include ...an evaluation of any specific requests by the worker for medical treatment or vocational training...”
   
b. NCIC RURPWCC V.A. (continued) “...including any alternatives for medical treatment and cost-effective return-to-work options including retraining or retirement.”
   
c. Although the RP does not, for example, have to recommend retraining, s/he is mandated when the worker requests retraining to evaluate that request and to document the reasons why it should or should not be honored.
   
d. NCIC RURPWCC VI.I.2. “If the rehabilitation professional believes that the worker is not cooperating with the provision of rehabilitation services, the RP shall advise all parties and shall describe what cooperative action on the part of the worker is sought. “
   
e. **Conclusion:** The plan must be **specific** to the individual.

B. U.S. Department of Labor definition of the rehabilitation plan:
   
1. 20 C.F.R. §663.245 (verbatim text): “The individual employment plan is
   
a. **An ongoing strategy**
   
b. **Jointly developed by the participant and case manager that**
   
c. **Identifies**
   
   (1) The participant’s employment goals,
   
   (2) Appropriate achievement objectives and
   
   (3) The appropriate combination of services for the participant to achieve employment goals.”
   
d. This brief but important definition suggests that
   
   (1) The IWRP is dynamic; it can and should be amended as needed
   
   (2) The worker’s input is essential
   
   (3) The IWRP must identify what the worker wants to achieve in rehab as well as what is realistic or appropriate, if that is different

C. Additional plan essentials
   
1. Vocational goals should be specific and suitable.
2. Specific costs and time frames should be included.
3. Plan should be revisited with the participant on a regular basis in order to track progress.
4. Plan should be revised as necessary to reach vocational goal.
5. Plan should be clearly written and understandable
6. Plan should outline the type and sequence of services.
7. Plan should outline the benefits the participant can expect.
8. Plan should promote open and frank cooperation among all parties in the rehabilitation process, and should outline the rehab professional’s role in keeping all parties informed.
9. Plan should stress that the rehabilitation professional will exercise independent, professional judgment in the rehabilitation process.

D. Benefits of a well-developed rehabilitation plan
   
1. Fosters cooperation among all parties by addressing:
E. Outline for the IWRP; components should include:

1. Rationale: what was taken into consideration in the development of the plan.
2. Services aimed at returning the injured worker to suitable employment, such as:
   a. Counseling regarding the rehabilitation process and vocational goals
   b. Training for job skills in a classroom setting
   c. Interpreter services
   d. Services through community rehabilitation programs such as Goodwill
   e. Job-seeking skills training through counselor or through human resource development programs offered through community colleges
   f. Coordination of on-the-job training programs to include the development of written agreements that identify skills to be learned and the responsibilities of all parties
   g. Job placement services
3. Vocational goal(s): the type of suitable employment that the injured worker and counselor have agreed upon and plan to pursue.
   a. If an injured worker cannot return to the kind of work he/she has done in the past, he/she may benefit from help with identifying different types of jobs that are related to his/her abilities.
   b. The counselor may conduct or refer the injured worker for academic or interest testing.
   c. The injured worker may change the vocational goal as the rehabilitation process evolves.
   d. Return-to-work options generally should be considered in the following priority (NCIC RURPWCC III.F. (1)-(7):
      (1) Current job, current employer
      (2) New job, current employer
      (3) On-the-job training, current employer
      (4) New job, new employer
      (5) On-the-job training, new employer
      (6) Formal vocational training to prepare worker for job with current or new employer.
      (7) Due to the high risk of small business failure, self-employment should be considered only when its feasibility is documented with reference to worker's aptitudes and training, adequate capitalization, and market conditions.
4. Responsibilities and activities:
   a. Actions that need to be taken to provide support or overcome limitations resulting from the injured worker's disability.
   b. The desired results of these actions.
   c. The way progress will be measured.
   d. How often the actions will be reviewed.
e. When the goal should be reached. No plan should be of indefinite duration. If the goals are not reached within a realistic time period the plan should be revised or services terminated.

f. Plan should clearly define the responsibilities of both the counselor and of the injured worker.

g. While it is not required by the rules, it is also important to involve the physician in plan review to verify that the plan is medically feasible and consistent with the restrictions the physician has outlined.

5. **Job placement and post-employment support:**
   a. Confirm job readiness and general readiness for employment
   b. Injured worker agrees to participate actively in job seeking
   c. Confirm job-seeking and job-holding skills
   d. Identify transferable skills
   e. Identify suitable jobs as they relate to injured worker’s skills and limitations
   f. Inform prospective employers of skills and limitations
   g. Assist the injured worker in complying with any licensing, immigration or other employment requirements
   h. Monitor work adjustment

6. **Identification of who will provide services:**
   a. The vocational rehabilitation counselor
   b. Community rehabilitation/work training programs
   c. Community colleges or universities
   d. Mental health centers
   e. Rehabilitation centers

IV. **Conclusion**
The individualized plan is a vital component in the rehabilitation process. When all parties are clear on goals and expectations, it opens the door to improved cooperation and to a more successful outcome for the injured worker. A thoughtful and well-constructed plan also enables the rehabilitation professional to be more cost effective since a concrete set of activities are defined in the plan.