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Employment Coaching: Working With Low-Income Populations To Use Self-Regulation Skills To Achieve Employment Goals

Introduction

New research has led policymakers and researchers to argue that some people might not achieve economic independence in part because of difficulty applying the self-regulation skills needed to get, keep, and advance in a job (Pavetti 2018; Cavadel et al. 2017). These self-regulation skills—sometimes referred to as soft skills or executive functioning skills—include the ability to finish tasks, stay organized, and control emotions. Evidence suggests that facing poverty, and the multiple stresses that accompany it, can make it particularly difficult to develop and use self-regulation skills (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). However, research indicates that interventions can strengthen these important skills (Kautz et al. 2014).

Based on the potential link between self-regulation skills and successful employment outcomes for low-income people, some employment programs, including some offered as part of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, pair program participants with coaches (Derr et al. 2018; Pavetti 2014; Ruiz De Luzuriaga 2015; Dechausay 2018). The coaches work with participants to set individualized goals and provide motivation, support, and feedback as the participants pursue their goals. The coaches aim to help the participants use and strengthen their self-regulation skills, succeed in the labor market, and move toward economic security. To assess whether coaching can improve employment outcomes for low-income people, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is currently sponsoring the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations (Box 1).

This brief focuses on how coaches may help participants use and strengthen self-regulation skills to meet employment goals. It first explains the self-regulation skills that are important for success in the labor market and how poverty and its related stressors can hamper their use. The brief then describes the key elements of coaching and the hypotheses underlying how coaching may improve employment outcomes.



An employment coaching session takes place in Jefferson County, Colorado. (Photo: Rich Clement, Mathematica)

Box 1. Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations

To learn more about the potential of coaching to help TANF recipients and other low-income people reach economic security, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awarded a contract to Mathematica and its partners, Abt Associates and MDRC, to evaluate employment coaching interventions. Employment coaching programs in this evaluation include (1) the [Family Development and Self-Sufficiency](#) program in Iowa; (2) Goal4 It!™ in [Jefferson County, Colorado](#); (3) [LIFT](#) in Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago; and (4) [MyGoals for Employment Success](#) in Houston and Baltimore. The evaluation will describe program implementation and use an experimental research design to examine the effectiveness of coaching interventions in helping people with low incomes succeed in the labor market. It will also examine the impact of coaching on self-regulation skills and the role of self-regulation skills in generating any impacts on employment outcomes.

Self-regulation skills are important for employment success

Self-regulation skills cover a broad set of skills that enable people to intentionally control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Although not exhaustive, Table 1 provides examples of self-regulation skills in three broad categories: (1) personality factors, (2) emotional skills, and (3) cognitive skills (Cavadel et al. 2017).

Table 1. Examples of self-regulation skills

Skill category	Skill	Definition
Personality factors	Motivation	The desire to start and finish tasks.
	Grit	The ability to persevere to attain long-term goals.
	Self-efficacy	The belief we have in our ability to perform at a high level.
Emotional skills	Emotion understanding	The ability to understand emotions in ourselves and others.
	Emotion regulation	The ability to alter the intensity of the emotion being experienced and the behaviors that go along with that emotion.
Cognitive skills	Executive function	A set of cognitive skills that helps us regulate and control our actions, particularly intentional action and setting and pursuing goals.
	Selective attention	The ability to attend to one particular aspect of a task in the face of other thoughts, information, and actions.
	Metacognition	A skill we use to observe and evaluate how we think, which is sometimes referred to as “thinking about thinking.”

Source: Cavadel et al. (2017).

All the self-regulation skills in Table 1 contribute to success in finding, keeping, and advancing in employment (Nyhus and Pons 2005; Hogan and Holland 2003; Störmer and Fahr 2013; Caliendo et al. 2015). For example, motivation, grit, and self-efficacy enable people to persist with a job search until they find a suitable job. On the job, employees often have to recognize emotions in others and regulate their own emotions, even in

stressful situations with their bosses, co-workers, and customers. Arriving at a job on time requires planning and time management, among other executive functioning skills. Workers also have to use selective attention to focus on one task they are working on, despite other distractions. Metacognition skills are required when determining the steps involved in conducting a task—either while looking for a job or on the job—and solving problems that arise while conducting the task.

Poverty can make it difficult to use self-regulation skills

All people have limited capacity or bandwidth to use their self-regulation skills, and poverty and its related stresses tax some of that bandwidth by placing demands on self-regulation (Muraven and Baumeister 2000). For example, the stress and logistical challenges that arise with unexpected bills, illness, child care, or transportation can make it hard for people with fewer financial resources to focus on looking for a job or maintaining a high level of performance on the job. In addition, evidence suggests that, often out of necessity, people facing scarcity of resources are more likely to concentrate on meeting their immediate needs rather than their long-term needs, compared to their peers with more resources. This in turn can lead them to make decisions that negatively affect their future (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Some evidence has shown that facing the *possibility* of not having enough money to cover a need, even if that possibility has not materialized, can significantly decrease a person’s ability to reason and to use self-regulation skills (Mani et al. 2013).

In addition, identifying, seeking out, and meeting the administrative requirements of the assistance programs that low-income people apply to in times of scarcity can further tax the use of self-regulation skills (Cavadel et al. 2017; Babcock 2014). People seeking services might have to attend several appointments at an office location far from their home, requiring them to find transportation to and from the office and to remember their appointment times. At the office, the program might require them to complete many different forms and the environment can be unwelcoming.

Coaches collaborate with participants to set and pursue goals

Although the terms *coaches* and *coaching* can describe many different approaches in many different contexts (Grant and Cavanagh 2011), we define *employment coaching* as a staff person trained in coaching techniques collaborating with a program participant to set and pursue goals related to employment.

The key characteristic of coaching—and what makes it fundamentally different from case management—is that it is collaborative. The coach and the participant work as partners. The coach serves as an ally and guide—supporting, motivating, and encouraging—but does not direct the participant. The participant, not the coach, directs the process of setting and pursuing his or her goals. In contrast, case managers typically set goals for participants and tell them what actions they should take to meet the goals. Moreover, coaches usually focus much less than case managers on ensuring that participants comply with program rules.

Employment coaches typically work with participants in the following ways:

1. Setting personalized goals related to employment. Coaches do not impose goals on participants. Instead participants are encouraged to set their own specific, short- and long-term goals that are meaningful to them and that they are motivated to achieve. Although the goals must relate broadly to employment and economic security, they do not need to be stated in these terms; the goals could be something the participant wishes to achieve with additional financial resources, such as a new home, a trip, or a new car.

2. Developing action plans to meet their goals. Coaches work with participants to develop action plans based on attainable steps and short-term goals that participants can achieve more easily and that serve as milestones to achieving the longer-term goals. Together, coaches and participants anticipate challenges to completing action steps and develop potential approaches to address these challenges. Over time, as participants learn the approach to setting and pursuing goals, the coach slowly withdraws assistance, allowing the participant to practice his

or her skills more independently—an approach known as scaffolding (Van de Pol et al. 2010; Babcock 2014).

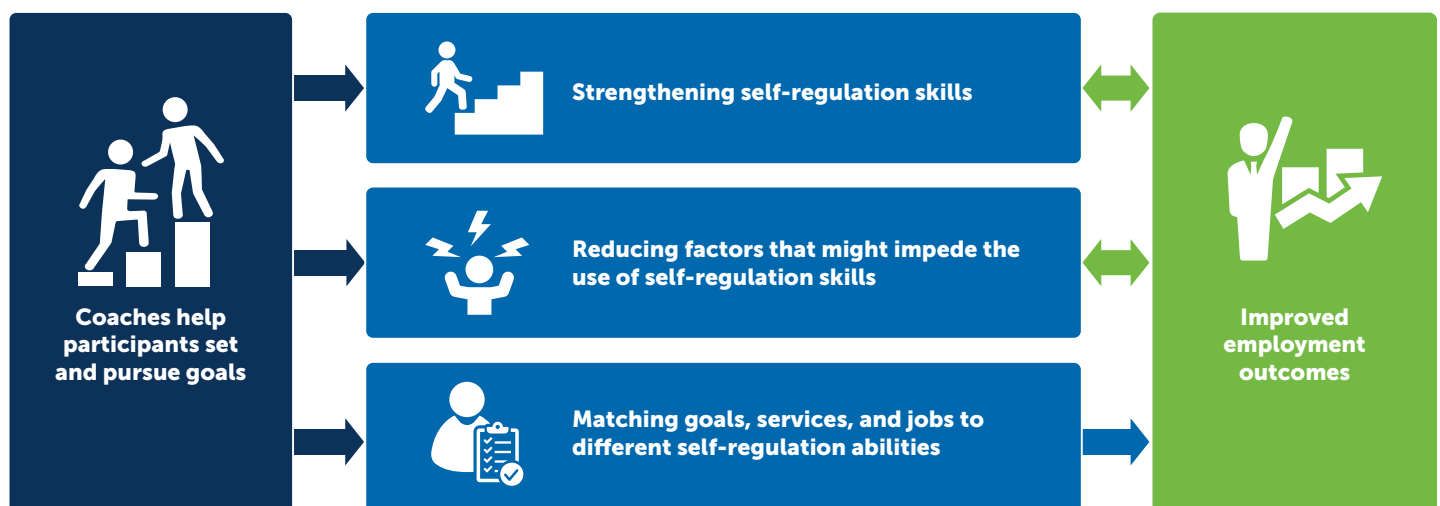
3. Supporting, motivating, and providing feedback as participants pursue their goals. Coaches check in regularly with participants about their progress toward achieving goals, on why they did not take certain action steps, and whether they should revise steps or goals as a result. Coaches express that they believe in the participant’s ability to succeed, show empathy, and celebrate the participants’ accomplishments.

Coaching is hypothesized to improve employment outcomes by helping participants apply and strengthen self-regulation skills

Employment coaches are expected to assist program participants achieve their employment goals by helping them apply and strengthen the many self-regulation skills—personality factors, emotional skills, and cognitive skills—that are important for success in the job market. Some coaching programs articulate their objectives in terms of helping participants apply self-regulations skills and ask coaches to assess participants’ self-regulation skills. Other programs do not refer explicitly to self-regulation skills in their objectives or in training coaches but still help participants apply and strengthen self-regulation skills by working collaboratively to set and pursue goals in the ways described earlier.

As illustrated in Figure 1, coaches may work with each participant to (1) strengthen the participant’s self-regulation skills; (2) reduce factors that could impede the participant’s use of self-regulation skills; and/or (3) match goals, jobs, and services to the participant’s self-regulation abilities. In addition, while

Figure 1. How accounting for self-regulation can improve employment outcomes: A conceptual framework



this brief focuses on coaching, coaches may provide additional support such as providing participants with information about services, education, training, or jobs; reviewing resumes and job applications; and linking participants with specific employers.

Coaches may help participants strengthen self-regulation skills. In working with participants to set and pursue employment goals, coaches provide opportunities for them to practice self-regulation skills (Locke and Latham 1990; Bandura and Locke 2003; Houser-Marko and Sheldon 2008). Just as with other skills, practicing self-regulation skills can strengthen them. Indeed, an ultimate objective of coaching is that the participant can set and successfully pursue employment and other goals without the coach. Stronger self-regulation skills in turn may lead to improved employment outcomes (Figure 1).

In working with the participant to set goals, coaches may help him or her learn the importance and effectiveness of goal setting as well as strengthen decision-making skills (Babcock 2014). Setting goals that are meaningful to the participant increases his or her motivation and self-efficacy (Locke and Latham 1990; Zimmerman et al. 1992).

A coach may also help a participant learn how to take steps to achieve his or her goals. For example, a participant might learn ways to avoid distractions when doing homework; ways to regulate emotions when stressed; and ways to plan, manage time, and be organized. Coaches can also suggest ways for a participant to use tools, such as planners, smartphone apps, or strategically placed notes, to help them be successful.

The close professional relationship that often develops between a coach and a participant is also viewed as important in developing self-regulation skills. By developing a trusting relationship with the participant and honoring his or her autonomy, coaches may improve the participant's motivation, emotion regulation, self-efficacy, and stress management (Butler and Randall 2013; Center on the Developing Child 2016).

A coach can also help motivate the participant. The coach recognizes progress the participant makes in pursuing his or her goals by praising the participant, sharing his or her success with program peers, or, in some programs, providing tangible rewards. The tangible rewards are usually given for reaching milestones toward achieving specific goals—such as passing a certification exam or obtaining an internship. These rewards may be provided in cash, gift cards, or items that help meet basic needs such as diapers. Some programs offer participants incentives throughout the program that in total are worth hundreds of dollars; others provide no tangible rewards. These strategies to foster motivation can increase participants'

persistence in achieving their goals and help motivate them to overcome self-regulation challenges (Baumeister et al. 2005; Pope and Harvey-Berino 2013).

Strengthening self-regulation skills may lead to a positive feedback loop: stronger self-regulation skills may improve employment outcomes, which in turn may provide opportunities to practice and further strengthen these skills. Figure 1 illustrates this by the arrow that points in both directions between strengthening self-regulation skills and improved employment outcomes.

Coaches may help participants reduce the factors that impede the use of self-regulation skills. As discussed previously, poverty and its stresses can hinder the use of self-regulation skills. For some participants, addressing the challenges that impede their use of self-regulation skills can be necessary before they can work on strengthening them (Center on the Developing Child 2016). Hence, some coaches also employ strategies to reduce the stress and lack of resources that hinder participants' use of their self-regulation skills (Figure 1).

Providing financial assistance or referrals to other resources may help counteract the effect of a limited income on the use of self-regulation skills. Either directly or via referrals, coaches can offer support to address needs for health care, substance use treatment, child care, transportation, housing, legal assistance, parenting education, or other services.

Some coaches help participants learn how to manage their stress. Coaches might demonstrate stress-reducing approaches, such as deep breathing and mindfulness techniques. Coaches might also discuss with participants the importance of taking care of themselves—getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and eating healthy foods—while recognizing and helping to develop plans to address the challenges of doing so.

Coaching programs can also ensure that program processes are easy to navigate and the office environment does not cause additional stress for participants. For example, some programs streamline application and orientation procedures so participants do not have to come into the office multiple times. The coaching programs might provide information that can help people easily remember program details and act on important information. Programs can also offer coaching in locations that are convenient for the participants, such as their homes or near their child-care providers. Programs can create welcoming environments that are quiet, clean, and organized to help calm participants and avoid distractions.

A positive feedback loop might also exist between reducing the factors that impede the use of self-regulation skills and

employment. For example, increased income from employment could lessen the tax placed on self-regulation skills and, in turn, improve the participants' use of those skills. The arrow in Figure 1 that points in both directions between reducing factors that hinder the use of self-regulation skills and improved employment outcomes illustrates this point.

Coaches can help match goals, services, and jobs to a person's self-regulation abilities. Everyone has differing self-regulation strengths and weaknesses (Almlund et al. 2017). In some programs, coaches assess a participant's relative strengths and weaknesses in this area (Dechausay 2018). They might then steer participants toward goals, services, and jobs that best match their stronger skills. This process is sometimes referred to as determining the "goodness of fit" (Martin et al. 2010; Guare 2014). For example, if a participant has a strong understanding of emotions, the coach might help the participant consider jobs that involve working directly with people. If another participant finds selective attention challenging, the coach could help the participant consider training opportunities that are more hands-on instead of lecture-based. As Figure 1 shows, matching goals, services, and jobs to participants' different self-regulation abilities may improve their employment outcomes by providing them with opportunities in areas where they are more likely to succeed. Rather than working to improve participants' use of their self-regulation skills, this matching approach focuses on their existing strengths and works around their relatively weaker abilities. (The arrow between this "matching" and "improved employment outcomes" is one-directional because we do not expect employment to improve the matching.)

In summary

Self-regulation skills are important for finding, keeping, and advancing in a job. Yet for many individuals with low incomes, poverty and the complexities and stresses that are associated with it can interfere with using these skills. By working with participants in a nondirective, collaborative way to set and work toward goals, coaches may help participants practice, apply, and strengthen their self-regulation skills. Coaches can also reduce the factors that impede participants' use of self-regulation skills or match them with goals, jobs, and services that play to their stronger self-regulation skills. The ultimate aim of the coach is to help program participants set and meet employment goals without the coach. An ongoing study, the Evaluation of Employment Coaching for TANF and Related Populations, is testing the effectiveness of this employment coaching model.

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