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Survey on Professional Development and Maintenance of Vocational Rehabilitation Practitioners in Japan

Original scientific paper

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Abstract

Vocational rehabilitation practitioners must recognize its significance and assume accountability. This study explored the perceptions of vocational rehabilitation practitioners in Japan regarding their professional development and obtained basic data for improving the vocational rehabilitation system in Japan. An online survey was conducted among practitioners at 336 Employment and Livelihood Support Centers for persons with disabilities, inquiring about their engagement with research, current educational pursuits, and training needs. In total, 155 practitioners responded to the survey. The results suggest that practitioners progressively refine their expertise as they accumulate experience. The study underscores the necessity of integrating research and practice, recommending the adoption of a knowledge translation framework to facilitate this process. In addition, effective use of online training is considered useful for establishing a training system. This data serves as a foundation for building training systems currently under consideration and provides insight into informal peer-to-peer training and involvement in professional associations.

Keywords: *Expertise, Knowledge Translation, Livelihood Support, Self-Improvement, Vocational Rehabilitation*

Achieving employment holds significance for those with disabilities, who often encounter barriers to social participation (Trombly, 1995). Employment support for individuals with disabilities not only improves their real-life situations, but also contributes to their positive growth, identity formation, and career development (Uno & Maebara, 2022). Supporting individuals with disabilities with job challenges and enabling them to experience success can enhance their self-efficacy and self-concept (Strong, 1998). Additionally, working has profound significance in the context of maintaining lives and forming identities (Dunn et al., 2008). Employment support providers can significantly affect the lives of individuals with disabilities. Thus, employment support providers must recognize its significance and assume accountability.

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Practitioners of vocational rehabilitation are expected to endeavor to fulfill this accountability. In the United States, vocational rehabilitation practitioners are encouraged to become certified rehabilitation counselors through training at higher education institutions (Chan et al., 2004; Rubin & Roessler, 2016). Additionally, Certified Rehabilitation Counselors must renew their certification every five years, engage in self-development by attending lectures, conferences, workshops, writing research papers, books, and so on (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification [CRCC], 2024). Further investigations are ongoing in the United States to enhance the quality of vocational rehabilitation. These include studies on the possession of master's degrees by support providers and the quality of support (Yu et al., 2023) as well as needs assessments for the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC–QE), which supports quality improvements in vocational rehabilitation services (Tansey et al., 2023).

In Japan, vocational rehabilitation promotion has been pursued by practitioners who provide specialized support. "The Act on the Promotion of Employment of Persons with Disabilities" in Japan stipulates the promotion of vocational rehabilitation. Direct practice agencies for persons with disabilities defined by this law include local vocational centers for Persons with Disabilities and employment and livelihood support centers for persons with disabilities (ELSCs). The Regional Vocational Centers for Persons with Disabilities, operated by the Japan Organization for Employment of the Elderly, Persons with Disabilities, and Job Seekers (JEED), a national organization, employs vocational counselors for persons with disabilities. A system was established to provide specialized training to those employed as vocational counselors for persons with disabilities after studying related fields at universities. ELSCs, commissioned by the national government to regional welfare agencies, support both employment and living, providing support for independence in vocational life in collaboration with organizations such as Local Vocational Centers for Persons with Disabilities (Maebara, 2021).

However, these two specialized professions in vocational rehabilitation in Japan do not have qualifications that guarantee their expertise. Although there are national qualifications related to employment support for persons with disabilities such as social workers, mental health social workers, and occupational therapists, there is no national qualification for vocational rehabilitation specialists. Consequently, few researchers specialize in vocational rehabilitation at higher education institutions in Japan, and no courses exist for training vocational rehabilitation specialists. In Japan, efforts are required to develop human resources at universities and other higher education institutions to improve the expertise of vocational rehabilitation practitioners (Maebara et al., 2021; Maebara & Nawaoka, 2021; Ogawa, 2019) and develop appropriate training systems (Matsui, 2013).

Recently, efforts have been made in Japan to develop a training system that maintains and improves the expertise of practitioners. The national government held the "Committee on Strengthening Cooperation between Employment and Welfare Policies for Persons with Disabilities" to discuss the development and securing of human resources supporting employment for persons with disabilities (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022). Ultimately, they decided to provide *basic training* to equip practitioners with cross-sectional knowledge and skills in the fields of employment and welfare (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021). This discussion improved the training system for support providers at ELSCs, which was left to the discretion of individual facilities regarding expertise acquisition (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024).

However, research on the expertise and human resource development of vocational rehabilitation practitioners in Japan is scarce. It focuses on clarifying the specialized knowledge and skills required by practitioners. Studies have examined the competencies required by vocational rehabilitation practitioners, such as vocational evaluation, vocational counseling, job coaching skills, and transition support skills (Kitakami & Yaeda, 2014; Yaeda, 2003). Yamaguchi and Yaeda (2017) indicated knowledge and skills related to

relationship formation and management, knowledge and skills regarding laws and policies related to employment support, and the necessary knowledge and vocational rehabilitation practices. Although discussions on expert competencies in vocational rehabilitation practitioners have been conducted in these studies, the debate remains inconclusive. Issues related to the development of human resources for vocational-rehabilitation practitioners in Japan have also been reported. The National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation (NIVR), a national research institute for vocational rehabilitation, reported that organizations engaged in human resource development have effective support skills, but such human resource development efforts are few (National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation [NIVR], 2022). Ohkawa et al. (2023) indicated that issues related to employee treatment and management influence the implementation of human resource development, emphasizing the need for policy support to address these issues. Previous studies have revealed that Japanese vocational-rehabilitation practitioners do not possess sufficient knowledge or skills (Maebara et al., 2022; Maebara & Yaeda, 2024; Yaeda et al., 2013). These problems exist in vocational rehabilitation in Japan. The lack of a formal educational system in Japan for the professional development of vocational rehabilitation practitioners necessitates individual efforts for training. It is vital for Japan's future to strive towards improvement. Therefore, understanding the perceptions of Japanese vocational rehabilitation practitioners regarding their own expertise and surrounding conditions is crucial as a baseline for future improvements.

Japanese vocational-rehabilitation practitioners are expected to fulfill their professional responsibilities. Therefore, this study aims to clarify the perceptions and surrounding conditions of expertise among ELSC practitioners in Japan.

Methods

Participants

This study targeted the ELSCs, one of Japan's representative vocational rehabilitation institutions. As of April 1, 2022, Japan had 336 ELSCs. Practitioners affiliated with these facilities were included as research subjects.

Survey Period and Procedures

Between September 15 and October 31, 2022, a request letter containing a URL link to the online survey form was mailed to ELSCs across Japan. Responses were obtained from 155 practitioners out of 336 surveyed ELSCs, yielding a response rate of 46.1%.

Survey Items

This study explored "Perceptions of research and training," "Situations related to research and training," and "Needs for training methods". The author developed the survey items to establish a baseline for vocational-rehabilitation practitioners in Japan. To enhance the item's validity, we referred to previous studies on vocational rehabilitation practices in Japan. Furthermore, the author, experienced in vocational rehabilitation practice and research, crafted these items after soliciting insights from field practitioners.

Basic Attribution:

Respondents were asked to select their sex from the following options: male, female, or other. In addition, they were asked to specify their age as of March 31, 2022. Respondents were required to indicate their highest educational attainment by selecting the following: junior high school, high school, vocational school, junior college, university, master's program, or doctoral program. Finally, they were asked to record their years of employment support as of March 31, 2022.

Perceptions of Research and Training:

Respondents were asked to provide their perceptions of "difficulty" (1 = difficult, 2 = somewhat difficult, 3 = neither, 4 = somewhat easy, 5 = easy), "usefulness" (1 = not useful, 2 = somewhat not useful, 3 = neither, 4 = somewhat useful, 5 = useful), and "enjoyment" (1 = painful, 2 = somewhat painful, 3 = neither, 4 = somewhat enjoyable, 5 = enjoyable) of research / training. The grading scale was employed to enable vocational rehabilitation practitioners to express their perceptions of their practices realistically.

Situations Related to Research and Training:

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

- For research:
  - "There is someone who can provide guidance and advice on research."
  - "I have basic knowledge to conduct research."
  - "I am interested in research activities."
  - "I feel the need for research activities."
- For training:
  - "It is easy to obtain the necessary literature and materials for self-study."
  - "I can secure time for self-study."
  - "I incorporate self-study into support."
  - "There are opportunities for exchanging opinions on support."
  - "I feel the need for training."

Needs for training methods:
Respondents were asked to rate their need for the following training methods on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not preferred at all, 2 = not preferred, 3 = neither, 4 = somewhat preferred, 5 = strongly preferred).
Online training: Learning through live lectures using software programs such as Zoom.
- On-demand training: Learning by viewing text and image content distributed in Internet browsers.
In-person training: traditional face-to-face learning by attending training venues.
Text Distribution: Learning by Reading Distributed Texts.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 29 was used for the statistical analysis of this study.

Basic Information

A simple tabulation was then performed. For educational attainment, Junior High School was coded as nine years, High School as 12 years, Vocational School as 14 years, Junior College as 14 years, university as 16 years, Graduate School (master's program) as 18 years, and Graduate School (Doctoral Program) as 21 years. This was based on the shortest completion period for the numerical conversion of education levels.

Perceptions of Research and Training

A paired *t*-test was conducted to compare the mean perceptions of highest educational attainment (below university, university, and above). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare the mean perceptions by years of experience (1–4, 5–9, 10–19, and 20+ years). Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between perceptions, educational attainment, and years of experience.

Situations Related to Research and Training

The average scores for the research-related items (four items) were calculated to derive a "research score." The average scores for the professional development-related items (5 items) were calculated to derive a "training score." Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to evaluate the internal consistency of the scores. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between educational attainment, years of experience, and perceptions of R&PD.

Needs for Training Methods

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean preferences for the different training methods. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships between Research and Professional Development scores, perceptions of research, and professional development. In this study, Pearson correlation coefficients of 0.2 or higher with significant differences were considered for discussion.

Ethical Considerations

The survey form included a statement that the survey results would be processed in such a manner that personal and facility names would not be identifiable, and that the results would be presented for research purposes in reports and conferences. Consent to participate in the study was obtained. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at the Tegata Campus of Akita University (approval number 4–11 dated June 20, 2022).

Results

Basic attribution

Responses were obtained from 155 practitioners. Given that 336 ELSCs were surveyed, the response rate was 46.1%. Practitioners' basic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Basic Attribution

Sex	Total	155 persons	
	Male	67 persons	
	Female	88 persons	
	Others	0 persons	
Age	M（SD）	45.0 years	(9.68)
	20～29 years	11 persons	7.1%
	30～39 years	34 persons	21.9%
	40～49 years	58 persons	37.4%
	50～59 years	36 persons	23.2%
	60～69 years	15 persons	9.7%
	No answer	1 person	0.6%
Educational background	Junior high school	0 persons	0%
	High school	16 persons	10.3%
	Vocational school	21 persons	13.5%
	Junior college	20 persons	12.9%
	University	90 persons	58.1%
	Master's program	8 persons	5.2%
	Doctoral program	0 persons	0%
Years in practice	M（SD）	13.8 years	(9.86)
	1～4 years	26 persons	16.8%
	5～9 years	37 persons	23.9%
	10～19 years	49 persons	31.6%
	Over 20 years	42 persons	27.1%
	No answer	1 person	0.6%

M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

Perceptions of Research and Training

Practitioners' perceptions of research and training are presented in Table 2. Next, a test was conducted to examine the difference in the average perceptions of research and training between those with less than a university education and those with a university education or higher. The results showed no significant differences in terms of "difficulty," "usefulness," and "interest" between the two groups.

Table 2.
Perceptions of Research and Training

Difficulty	M	SD
Research	3.72	0.86
Training	2.70	0.85
Usefulness	M	SD
Research	4.03	0.81
Training	4.26	0.74
Enjoyment	M	SD
Research	3.46	0.78
Training	3.56	0.65

M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

Table 3 presents the differences in perceptions of research and training among practitioners with varying years of employment support practice. A significant difference was observed only in the perception of "difficulty." Practitioners with 1–4 years of experience perceived research as significantly "easy" and training as significantly "difficult".

Table 3.
Differences in the Perceptions Among Years in Practice

Difficulty	Years in practice	M	SD	*F*	
Research	1〜4 years	4.31	0.79	7.64	1~4>5~9**
	5〜9 years	3.41	0.80		1~4>20 over**
	10〜19 years	3.84	0.75		
	Over 20 years	3.52	0.89		
Training	1〜4 years	2.19	1.02	4.09	1~4<5~9**
	5〜9 years	2.89	0.77		1~4<10~19*
	10〜19 years	2.76	0.83		1~4<20 over*
	Over 20 years	2.76	0.73		
Usefulness	Years in practice	M	SD	*F*	
Research	1〜4 years	3.88	0.77	0.51	n.s.
	5〜9 years	4.00	0.85		
	10〜19 years	4.12	0.78		
	Over 20 years	4.05	0.85		
Training	1〜4 years	4.15	0.67	0.46	n.s.
	5〜9 years	4.22	0.71		
	10〜19 years	4.35	0.78		
	Over 20 years	4.29	0.74		
Enjoyment	Years in practice	M	SD	*F*	
Research	1〜4 years	3.19	0.90	0.51	n.s.
	5〜9 years	3.54	0.77		
	10〜19 years	3.57	0.71		
	Over 20 years	3.45	0.77		
Training	1〜4 years	3.27	1.00	2.44	n.s.
	5〜9 years	3.57	0.55		
	10〜19 years	3.67	0.52		
	Over 20 years	3.62	0.54		

*p<.05, **p<.01, n.s.: non-significance
M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

Situations Related to Research and Training

Table 4 presents situations related to research and training for practitioners. All items constituting the research score had an average score of 3.00 or higher. Conversely, in the training score, "securing time for training" had the lowest average score at 2.92, while "the necessity of training" had the highest average score at 4.25.

Table 4.
Situations Related to Research and Training

Items	M	SD
Research score（α=0.71）	3.25	0.74
There is someone who can provide guidance and advice on research.	3.25	1.22
I have basic knowledge to conduct research.	3.01	0.97
I am interested in research activities.	3.10	0.98
I feel the need for research activities.	3.66	0.85
Training score（α＝0.61）	3.63	0.58
It is easy to obtain the necessary literature and materials for self-study.	3.63	1.05
I can secure time for self-study.	2.92	1.06
I incorporate self-study into support.	3.46	0.95
There are opportunities for exchanging opinions on support.	3.88	0.85
I feel the need for training.	4.25	0.71

The Pearson correlation analysis among practitioners' education, experience, and scores

Table 5 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis between practitioners' education, years of experience, and their "research score" and "training score." A positive correlation was confirmed between years of experience and the "training score" (p<.01).

Table 5.
Correlation Analysis of Situations Related to Research and Training

	Research score	Training score
Years in education	-0.04	-0.10
Years in practice	0.06	.234**

*p<.05, **p<.01

Next, Table 6 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis between practitioners' perceptions and their "research score" and "training score." For the research score, a negative correlation with the perceived difficulty of research and a positive correlation with perceived usefulness and enjoyment were confirmed. Additionally, the training score showed positive correlations with the perceived usefulness and enjoyment of both the research and training.

Table 6.
Correlation Analysis of Practitioners' Perceptions

	Research			Training		
	Difficulty	Usefulness	Enjoyment	Difficulty	Usefulness	Enjoyment
Research score	-.251**	.287**	.370**	-0.08	.176*	0.14
Training score	-0.12	.207*	.262**	0.00	.256**	.209**

*p<.05, **p<.01

Needs for Training Methods

One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean need for training among all practitioners (Table 7). The results showed a significant main effect of the training method, F (3, 450) = 13.60, $p < .01$. Multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni method revealed that the preference for text distribution was significantly lower than that for the other methods.

Table 7.
ANOVA of Needs for Training Methods

Methods	M	SD	*F*	
Online	3.94	0.81	13.60**	Online =
On-demand	3.91	0.90		On-demand =
In-person	3.90	0.81		In-person > **
Text	3.43	1.10		Text

*p<.05, **p<.01
M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted between the practitioners' educational backgrounds and years of experience with their needs for each training method, but no significant correlations were identified. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis of the research score, training score, and need for each training method are presented in Table 8. A positive correlation was identified between research scores and preferences for online ($p < .01$), on-demand ($p < .01$), and in-person ($p < .05$) training methods. Additionally, a positive correlation was observed between the training score and the preference for the in-person training method ($p < .01$) training method.

Table 8.
Correlation Analysis of Needs for Training Method

	Online	On-demand	In-person	Text
Research score	.288**	.260**	.202*	0.11
Training score	0.08	0.15	.212**	0.10

*p<.05, **p<.01

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis between the need for each training method and perceptions of research and training are presented in Table 9. A positive correlation was identified between the perceived usefulness of the research and preference for online ($p < .01$) and on-demand ($p < .01$) training methods. Additionally, a positive correlation was observed between the perceived usefulness of training and the preference for in-person training ($p < .05$).

Table 9.
Correlation Analysis of Perceptions of Research and Training

	Research			Training		
	Difficulty	Usefulness	Enjoyment	Difficulty	Usefulness	Enjoyment
Online	-0.02	.220**	.200*	-0.11	0.06	0.00
On-demand	0.03	.253**	.198*	-0.13	0.13	0.07
In-person	0.10	0.13	0.10	-0.10	.201*	0.14
Text	0.06	0.08	-0.02	-0.02	0.04	0.08

*p<.05, **p<.01

Discussion

Practitioners in Japan's vocational rehabilitation field must continuously enhance their expertise to fulfill their accountability toward their clients. Because Japanese universities do not offer specialized training in vocational rehabilitation, it is necessary to begin discussions on developing future training programs while launching efforts to enhance the expertise of current practitioners. Although the government is working to build a training system, initiatives, such as establishing a supervision system for supporters (Ishihara, 2021; Ishihara & Yaeda, 2019a, 2019b) and promoting interagency collaboration for mutual training in the community (Maebara, 2023a, 2023b) are also considered effective. The results provide foundational data to support such discussions and considerations for enhancing expertise.

Perspectives on Enhancing Expertise

The results revealed that practitioners in Japan's vocational rehabilitation field improved their expertise through case experiences in their practice settings. The practitioners' perceptions of research and training evolved with their employment support experiences. Young practitioners with less experience tended to perceive research as more difficult when they gained experience, whereas their perception of the difficulty of training decreased over time. Furthermore, practitioners recognize the value of research and training, suggesting that gaining experience might lead to increased recognition of the necessity of training. Situations related to research and training were related to practitioners' perceptions of usefulness and interest.

Based on the results of this study, it can be inferred that engaging in support work helps practitioners develop self-awareness of their skills and knowledge. Through their experience, practitioners are expected to acquire perspectives on how to apply their skills and knowledge in practice settings. A notable point related to the growth of practitioners is the increasing recognition of the necessity for training and the potential for research and environmental support to trigger expertise enhancement. While Japan could consider offering more specialized vocational rehabilitation education in universities, there are significant challenges in building such systems. Therefore, it is necessary to consider ways to enhance the expertise of practitioners.

Knowledge Translation is effective. Recently, KT has been highlighted as a means to overcome barriers such as time constraints and limited access to skills and research, and to enable evidence-based approaches for practitioners (Lui et al., 2014). KT is a method for bridging the gap between research and practice and disseminating and integrating research findings into practice settings. Although reports on KT in Japan are scarce, it has been indicated to have a positive potential for changing practices (Goda & Iwai, 2022, 2023; Maebara & Yaeda, 2020; Takamura, 2013). In particular, new evidence is required to develop new knowledge, ideas, and practices into services, and continuous dialogue and evaluation between researchers and practitioners are necessary (Farkas & Anthony, 2007). Incorporating KT methods into vocational rehabilitation could facilitate collaboration between researchers and practitioners and improve support program outcomes (Leahy et al., 2014). Despite recognizing the significance of research and being proactive in attempting new research-based support approaches, there are challenges in translating knowledge into practical applications (Graham et al., 2013). Given these findings, the integration of research and practice is necessary based on practitioners' needs and circumstances, making it crucial to consider how to introduce KT into Japan's vocational rehabilitation practice.

Strategies to Promote Training

Next, it clarifies strategies for promoting training within the construction of a system that supports expertise enhancement. Practitioners perceive the need for training beyond mere text distribution, recognizing that autonomous learning based on text alone does not produce desirable learning outcomes. The situations related to research and training, as well as the influence of these situations on preferences for training methods other than text, may prompt actions towards training for expertise enhancement. Additionally, the perception of the usefulness of research and training can prompt actions toward training.

An unexpected finding regarding training needs was the strong demand for

training not only in person, but also online or on-demand. Conversely, the low demand for self-study based on text alone was also confirmed. These results suggest the usefulness of online methods for providing effective training opportunities. Studies outside the vocational rehabilitation field in Japan have reported higher participant evaluations of interactive, participatory online formats (Takahashi et al., 2021). Practice reports suggest the necessity of planning training that leverages the advantages of both in-person and online training (Onishi, 2021). Moreover, no differences have been identified in terms of perceived educational effectiveness between in-person and online training (Eda, 2021; Ushida et al., 2020). Online training offers advantages, such as freeing practitioners from time constraints due to busy work schedules, addressing distance issues for training participation, and meeting diverse educational needs (Nagae, 2021; Zheng, 2020). Therefore, it is important to effectively utilize online methods to create training opportunities for vocational rehabilitation practitioners.

Currently, Japan is in the process of building a training system for vocational rehabilitation practitioners and the potential inclusion of online training content is considered. The results of this study highlight the need for practitioners. It is important to consider the forms of training systems that can enhance expertise by incorporating their needs and perspectives.

Limitations and Research Implications

This study aimed to elucidate the perceptions of vocational-rehabilitation practitioners in Japan regarding their expertise. While this study provides meaningful insights into the support perspectives of Japanese vocational rehabilitation practitioners, one significant limitation is the insufficient perspective on improving the research and training situations sought by practitioners. This study did not conduct a cross-analysis of the content of training and teaching strategies, presumably due to anticipated differences in preferred teaching strategies depending on the content. Therefore, this study only identifies broad trends. Future research should conduct a qualitative analysis to elucidate these details. Moving forward, it is necessary to investigate environmental compensation that would enhance motivation and action toward improving expertise. Future studies should include surveys and qualitative research to better understand these factors.

Conclusion

This study aimed to clarify the perceptions of vocational-rehabilitation practitioners in Japan regarding their expertise. This study empirically presents the current situation of employment support practitioners at disability employment and life support centers in Japan. The discussions revealed that integrating practice and research from the KT perspective and effectively utilizing online training environments tailored to practitioners' needs are crucial for enhancing expertise. The data obtained in this study can be utilized as foundational data for building training systems that are currently under consideration. Additionally, it can provide insight into informal mutual training among practitioners and their activities within professional associations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

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