

★ Shane Heasley



In 2002, I packed my suitcase, boxed up the belongings in my room, and much to frustration of my mother began singing the chorus to John Denvers 'Leaving on a jet plane,' for the two weeks preceding my departure from the small north island town I hail from; arriving in the land of the scarifie to arm myself with an education, and make my mark on the world.

Like many new school leavers, I didn't have a great idea of what I was going to do, and with a few changes in majors along the way, I eventually graduated uni, with a conjoint degree in economics, management, and politics – though none the wiser as to my calling in life.

Through networking and getting to know people through the various roles I took on as a student, I came to know owners of the company that subsequently employed me and where I have worked since graduating. The field of vocational rehabilitation was a foreign concept to me, but the more I questioned and learned about the how, what, when, and why professionals do this work, the more the dynamic nature, and constant challenges (both personal and professional) appealed to me – so it was back to the books for some specialist training.

The role of the vocational rehabilitation consultant is to assess, develop, and implement rehabilitation programmes to assist clients to become 'work ready' in employment considered sustainable by their medical team. Clients who are referred for this service vary in their readiness to accept input in this area of their lives. Many are still moving through the grievance cycle for the loss of their past work (and often their ingrained sense of identity), and adjusting to their new selves following illness or accident.

As a practitioner, I need to be able to manage and guide the client through the process, as well as meet the competing constraints of time and outcome requirements put in place by referring organisations. This means, in addition to developing career practice skills, I need to become a leader of multi disciplinary teams, a speaker of plain English, and a strong negotiator.

Carl Rogers's Person-Centred Theory, though a theory that underpins career counselling, doesn't sit particularly well in vocational rehabilitation as the work tends to be a more directive 'therapist-led' helping process. This dynamic can be challenging for therapist and client alike. In my case however, the rewards of assisting people regain their independence triumph over the constraints of the environment in which the work is undertaken.

Vocational rehabilitation is a rewarding and highly challenging specialisation. Although entering this field was a chance occurrence for me, I was really encouraged during a workshop I facilitated at the Otago Polytechnic to meet a number of new practitioners, all with aspirations to work in this field of career practise.