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Functional Assessment for Adults with Disabilities

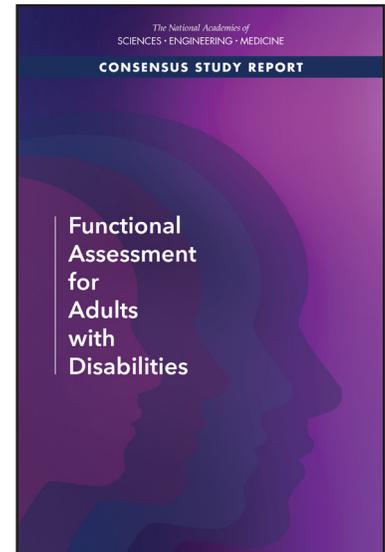
The U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) provides monetary benefits to eligible people with disabilities through its Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. As of December 2017, SSDI had approximately 10.4 million beneficiaries, and SSI served about 7.1 million recipients who were classified as blind or disabled.

With support from SSA, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to look at ways to collect information about a person's physical and mental functional abilities relevant to work requirements. The resulting report, *Functional Assessment for Adults with Disabilities*, lays out the committee's findings and conclusions.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Through an extensive literature review and a series of meetings soliciting expert input and public comment, the committee gathered information in four overlapping areas:

- *background information* on the concepts of disability, function, and functional assessment, along with the types, sources, and quality of functional information; properties of assessment measures; and potential threats to validity in assessments.
- *instruments* used to assess the effects of impairments on general daily life and participation and/or on work-related function, the relationship between instruments used to assess activities of daily living and the physical and mental demands of work, and instruments used to assess work limitations related to health conditions.
- *spectrum of changes in work-related functional abilities* that may occur during the progression of four selected impairments and the potential effects of treatment on a person's ability to perform work-related functions.
- *functional assessment processes* in selected public and private disability programs that provide monetary benefits.



THE COMMITTEE'S OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

In addition to specific findings and conclusions related to the four categories outlined above, the committee reached five overall conclusions.

Relationship of Functional Abilities to Work Participation

The committee reached the following conclusion:

Individuals' assessed functional abilities relevant to work requirements when assessed outside of actual work settings may be insufficient to establish their capacity to perform full-time work on a regular and continuing basis.

Assessing a person's functional abilities relevant to work requirements is an important part of determining whether that person is able to meet workplace demands and sustain work performance on a regular and continuing basis. Numerous validated performance-based and self-report instruments are available to assess physical and mental functions, yet such assessments do not necessarily address that person's capacity to perform tasks required for work participation. For instance, someone who is capable of performing a set of activities separately may not be able to coordinate and sequence them effectively. A person may be able to perform work tasks successfully during a single assessment but be unable to perform those tasks on a day-to-day basis.

Factors related to a health condition (e.g., side effects of a medication) or work environment (e.g., noise levels, temperatures) may limit the ability to participate in work on a regular and continuing basis, even if the person is able to perform each of the tasks associated with a job. The controlled, quiet testing environment may also differ from the actual work environment in a way that may negatively affect the ability to perform the work tasks. Moreover, the capacity to perform work requirements successfully in one specific work environment does not necessarily indicate the ability to perform the same work in a different setting.

Multiple Sources of Information

The committee reached the following conclusion:

The validity of the results of work-related functional assessments is enhanced by a comprehensive approach that includes test results and other information about an individual's physical and mental functional abilities from multiple sources, as well as relevant social and environmental factors and the full scope of tasks involved in a job and sustained gainful employment.

No single source is likely to provide all of the information needed to evaluate an individual's ability to work. Professionals in multiple disciplines administer and interpret results of assessments of physical and mental function. Convergence of information from multiple sources increases confidence in its validity, so it is important to combine and evaluate the consistency of information from different sources (e.g., self-reports, quantitative measures, medical records, consultative examinations) when evaluating an individual's ability to work.

Integrated Assessment

The committee reached the following conclusion:

Assessments that integrate information about impairments and abilities, including multiple tests of different types, repeated over time, provide the most useful information about work-related function.

Many validated instruments are available for measuring physical and mental functional abilities at the impairment and body or organ system level, but no single tool, by itself, can reliably and consistently determine the inability or ability to work.

The available instruments are useful individually, but their value may be increased when different types of instruments are combined to provide a fuller picture of an individual's ability to sustain work on a regular and continuing basis, especially when they can be repeated over time.

Furthermore, assessments that provide information regarding the integrated effect of a person's impairments on general daily life and participation are useful for capturing the effects of multiple impairments and related conditions on the functional ability to meet work requirements.

Challenges for Assessment

The committee reached the following conclusion:

Numerous challenges complicate accurate assessment of an individual's ability to work, including the following:

- Measures of physiological, morphological, psychological, or cognitive severity (e.g., laboratory findings, signs, or symptoms of impairments) may not correlate with the severity of functional limitations (i.e., the effect of a condition on an individual's ability to work or conduct daily life).
- It is simpler to demonstrate inability or limitation to perform a specific activity (e.g., reaching overhead, climbing a ladder) than to demonstrate an

individual's ability to perform the combination of activities required for different occupations.

- Tests of functional abilities often do not measure whether an individual is able to combine functions to perform tasks as needed for work.
- Successful work performance is more than the sum of the specific tasks and skills required, and the overall limitation to successful work for an individual is often more than the sum of single impairments.
- Threats to the validity of assessments of functional abilities include testing of maximal versus typical performance, assessment of episodic activity versus sustained task performance, absence of standardized testing conditions, mixed-motive incentives, compromised test integrity owing to prior use of the test in low-stakes testing applications, and diverse test populations on whom tests may not have been validated.
- Symptoms associated with psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety can affect a person's ability to manage one or more limitations in a work setting. Therefore, it is necessary to consider them when assessing an individual's ability to sustain work on a regular and continuing basis because a person's capacity to work may be overestimated if a psychological comorbidity is present.

Assessment of functional abilities related to work is more complex than whether and how long a person can sit, stand, walk, or perform specific activities.

A person's ability to perform a single work activity needs to be evaluated with respect to the context and practical relevance of his or her ability to perform work tasks effectively and hold a job. It is also important to consider coexisting conditions, such as depression or anxiety, that can further impair functioning.

Also, the validity of assessments of functional abilities may be compromised by factors such as testing of maximal versus typical performance, assessment of episodic activity versus sustained task performance, or the absence of standardized testing conditions.

Quality and Quantity of Information

The committee reached the following conclusion:

A number of factors, including age, gender, lower socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, cultural group, and geographic location, may limit the quality and quantity of functional information available for a disability applicant.

Functional assessment instruments vary in the degree to which they have been evaluated or adapted for use in different populations, making it important to consider an instrument's performance across multiple subgroups. This may limit the availability of assessments that can provide valid and reliable information for these populations.

Health exams that are relevant to disability determinations, including cardiovascular tests and psychological tests, may not be available to people who are underinsured or uninsured. In addition, the tests for functional assessment vary in the degree to which they have been evaluated or adapted for use in different populations. This may limit the availability of assessments that can provide valid and reliable information for these populations.

IN CONCLUSION

Determinations about a person's ability to perform and sustain full-time work are more complicated than can be indicated by an assessment of individual body structures, functions, or impairments.

Functional assessments provide important information for disability determinations, and many validated instruments are available to assess work-related physical and mental functions. Since no single tool or source is likely to provide all of the information needed to evaluate an individual's ability to work, it is important to combine and evaluate the consistency of information from different sources when evaluating an individual's ability to work.

To read the report, please visit

[nationalacademies.org/FunctionalAssessment](https://www.nationalacademies.org/FunctionalAssessment).

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