

The Characteristics of a Good Benefit Counselor

Individuals interested in pursuing a career as a benefits counselor come with different backgrounds, each bringing their own knowledge, learning style, and approach to the job. While the backgrounds, baseline skills and personal approach to the job may vary; there are still several important characteristics of an effective benefits counselor.

Regardless of their formal education, training, or life experience, a successful benefits counselor will have many of the following qualities:

A “pathological need to know”

A good benefit counselor has a keen sense that there is more to know about a topic other than what appears on the surface. They have an inquisitive and curious mind and are willing to thoroughly research a topic. They thrive on new challenges and seeking information and answers where they do not already exist. Some benefits counselors even joke that they will not sleep until they get the final piece of the puzzle in place. Benefits Counselors are typically very resourceful and will read, surf the Internet, contact experts and do whatever else it takes to find the answers they need.

Persistence

“Leave no stone unturned” is the motto of the successful benefits counselor, who will keep digging until all possible answers to a question have been exhausted. In order to do a satisfactory job, the benefits counselor has to be able to ensure that information they have obtained is correct. Challenging information or people who have given the information is not an easy thing to do. The benefits counselor is tenacious in their desire to learn the truth, and are the kind of person you would want on your side if you were struggling to make sense of the public benefit system. The goal of a benefits counselor is to get cooperation from people in power, and to do so in a way that builds a productive and long-lasting relationship.

Analytical mind

The benefits counselor has to interpret complex policy, rules, and procedures, administrative code, and legislative language into practical and understandable information. They have to see beyond the initial question and determine the questions the individual they are serving does not know to ask. The benefits counselor must be able to interpret word problems, process technical information, and identify and focus on the key problem question. The benefits counselor also must apply sound and consistent thinking to the decision-making process that is part of the benefits planning and assistance role.

“Bitten” by the benefits bug

The effective benefits counselor approaches problems and issues not only with enthusiasm, but also with a conviction that there are answers and a determination that problems can be resolved. The individual is compassionate and understands that the system itself can be a barrier to employment for persons with disabilities. They are committed to making access to work easier for people with disabilities and are passionate about people getting information they can understand. They recognize that agencies administering benefit programs must follow their own rules. Most importantly, they believe that the individual they are serving is

capable of making an informed decision with regard to work, using the information provided through a benefit analysis.

Good at math

Someone who is anxious about math is likely to have difficulty understanding benefit calculations, applying those calculations, and then drawing accurate conclusions from a series of such calculations. Math is a big part of the job.

Knows what they don't know

In this field, ignorance is bliss, but it is also VERY dangerous. Giving incorrect information to an individual seeking guidance can have devastating results, such as a large overpayment of cash benefits, an unplanned loss of cash benefits or health care. It is important that the benefits counselor recognize their shortcomings and have the ability and willingness to ask for help. The benefits counselor who knows *everything* necessary to do the job doesn't exist—an effective benefits counselor has a confidence in their abilities but also admits there is much more they still need to learn.

Aptitude to develop technical writing skills

Writing requirements for a benefits counselor range from accurately completing forms to clearly communicating highly technical information in a summary report. Benefits counselors:

- Complete data forms;
- Profile customer characteristics and circumstances;
- Write letters on several levels to several different stakeholders; and
- Produce a written summary or report of a benefits analysis.

While there are ways to assist staff with these writing tasks, it is important that the benefits counselor has some experience with producing written work and is not averse to putting time into this area. Someone who indicates that they dislike paperwork, don't see it as a priority, or have never written a professional report or document, need to be carefully considered in regard to how well this individual is going to meet the expectations of the job.

Attention to detail

A successful benefits counselor pays attention to details. A carefully completed analysis is one that:

1. Examines all of the benefits, entitlements, subsidies and services with income-related eligibility criteria;
2. Analyzes the impact earnings from work will have on cash assistance, health coverage, and continued eligibility.
3. Looks closely at each individual's personal circumstances and goals and will incorporate appropriate work incentives into the analysis process.

The benefits counselor must blend all of these elements into the information provided to the consumer. Two people with exactly the same set of benefits, entitlements, subsidies and services will not have identical benefits analysis summaries. Look for the person who will approach every benefit analysis as a new and different challenge and every individual they serve as a person with unique circumstances.

Positive attitude

When hiring a benefits counselor, look for the person who won't be deterred when things get complicated. Someone who will just complain about "the system" without looking for creative solutions is not a good candidate. Seek the action-oriented person. Philosophically, the benefits counselor must believe that people with disabilities can work and should have the opportunity to pursue their employment aspirations. The successful candidate is undaunted by complicated rules and believes that it's possible to make the current system work. If the benefits counselor conveys a positive outlook, it will give the individual they are serving a sense of hope. It will also create an atmosphere in which the benefits counselor can work successfully with personnel from other agencies.