

WORKING WITH BUSINESSES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR CONSUMERS WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

AN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE GUIDE FOR
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES AND STAFF

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Negative employer attitudes have long been considered a major barrier to employment for people who are blind or visually impaired. A potential avenue to address this barrier is the interactions that vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency personnel have with employers. In addition to being an opportunity to address negative employer attitudes, the expectations for VR agency personnel to work with employers/businesses¹ have increased in recent years. With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, P. L. 113-128), this expectation has become a clear requirement that must be discussed in the state plan. However, many VR counselors who work with blind and visually impaired consumers are not comfortable with this activity.

There is limited to no empirical evidence about the best ways to interact with employers and work with businesses. The existing body of literature on this topic focuses primarily on expert opinion and a few studies with employers that have inquired about their preferences for interacting with rehabilitation agencies about employing people with disabilities (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006; Buys & Rennie, 2001). Very little research about working with employers has been conducted specific to people who are blind or visually impaired, and the research that has been conducted has been qualitative in nature (Crudden, Williams, McBroom, & Moore, 2002).

This research study advances previous research as it includes empirical analyses that document relationships between variables of interest (e.g., consumer employment outcomes and VR staff behaviors, employer knowledge and attitudes). It also includes qualitative data collected from VR agencies identified as excelling at business relationships, which provides additional evidence from experts regarding how best to work with businesses. The major findings from four research studies investigating how VR agencies interact with businesses, and their use of the Business Relations Model (BRM) or dual customer approach, are presented first, followed by recommendations for agencies and recommendations for counselors. The final section provides information about where to find the publications with more details about the research findings that support this practice guide.

¹Although the term “business” is preferred over “employer” by VR professionals whose focus is business development, for this report the term “employer” will be used to refer to a person within a business who makes hiring decisions.

Key Research Findings

Survey of VR Personnel: Perceptions about Employer Attitudes and Working with Businesses

- The majority of VR personnel who participated believe that employers have more negative attitudes towards hiring someone who is blind or visually impaired compared to someone with another type of disability. However, this belief was more prevalent among rehabilitation counselors than business relations staff.
- This study did not document that employers are actually more negative about hiring someone who is blind or visually impaired compared to someone with another type of disability; however, it does indicate that VR personnel, particularly rehabilitation counselors, anticipate greater employer resistance to hiring someone with a visual disability.
- Survey results documented some differences in the way rehabilitation counselors and business relations staff approach and work with employers. Business relations staff are more likely than rehabilitation counselors to approach an employer from the employer's perspective as a business, focusing on developing a relationship, understanding the employer's needs, helping that employer meet those needs, and focusing on consumer abilities.
- The most commonly recommended technique to use when approaching an employer about hiring someone who is blind or visually impaired for both rehabilitation counselors and business relations staff was providing information about accommodations and assistive technology (AT). Accommodations and/or AT (providing information or demonstration of them) was mentioned as a best technique by 35% of study participants.
- Another commonly mentioned technique was utilizing on the job training or other work experiences to allow consumers who are blind or visually impaired an opportunity to work within a business (19.1% overall). Using work experiences was mentioned very frequently by VR personnel in some agencies (e.g., 43 to 45%), while it was not mentioned at all, or by only one person, in other agencies. This may indicate that it is considered very successful in those agencies that emphasize the use of the technique, while other agencies may not advocate its use.
- Focusing on job applicant's qualifications to effectively perform the job was another common response (18.6% overall).

RSA-911 Analyses: VR Staff Interactions with Employers and Consumer Employment Outcomes

- The way counselors interacted with employers was associated with consumer employment outcomes: the more agency counselors reported approaching employers as customers whose needs were to be considered (i.e., using the dual customer approach), the more likely consumers served by the agency were closed in

competitive integrated employment. Results also indicate that counselors' use of blindness-specific techniques with employers was important, but not as important as using the dual customer approach.

- The way business relations staff interacted with employers was also associated with consumer employment outcomes: the more agency business relations staff reported using blindness-specific techniques when interacting with employers, the more likely blind or visually impaired consumers served by the agency were closed in competitive employment. The three blindness specific techniques were: (1) provide education about how blind/visually impaired people can function on the job, (2) expose employers to employed people who are blind/visually impaired, (3) provide referrals to other businesses that employ someone who is blind or visually impaired.
- Another component of this research indicated there is little support for a relationship between what administrators reported was happening at the agency level in terms of use of the dual customer approach and consumer employment outcomes. These combined findings indicate that how individual VR staff interact with employers is more important than agency policy on business interactions.

Survey of Employers: Measuring Knowledge and Attitudes

- When employers were asked who they would contact about accommodating someone who is blind or visually impaired, only 8.8% of the randomly identified sample cited an appropriate source of information (e.g., the state vocational rehabilitation agency); 49.7% cited a secondary source (e.g., local disability organization or job service), and 41.5% were not able to identify an appropriate source.
- Because more than one-fifth of the sample identified their human resources department (HR) as a source of information for accommodations, the responses of the 25 people in the randomly identified sample employed as HR personnel were evaluated. Of these HR respondents, 20% identified an appropriate source of information, 40% identified a secondary source, and 40% could not identify an appropriate source of information.
- This study found that most employers have limited or no understanding of how people who are blind or visually impaired can perform routine job tasks. The majority of employers (67%) could not identify how blind or visually impaired people perform any of five typical job tasks (accessing a document already in print, using the computer, using general office equipment, using standard industrial equipment or machinery, and handling a cashier position).
- Employers referred by VR agencies to participate in the survey were more likely to identify correct strategies for accomplishing the five typical job tasks than employers in the randomly identified sample. However, even for this more

knowledgeable VR-referred sample, more than one-third also had no knowledge about how someone with a visual impairment could perform the job tasks and just slightly more than one-fifth demonstrated moderate to high knowledge.

- Employers with greater levels of knowledge had more positive attitudes towards blind or visually impaired persons as employees. Increasing employer knowledge about how blind or visually impaired people can perform work tasks – in other words, about job accommodations in the form of assistive technology and compensatory techniques – is one potential avenue to improve their attitudes towards this population as employees.
- Having hired a person with blindness or visual impairment in the past significantly predicted positive employer attitudes. Having a personal relationship with someone who is blind or visually impaired was not associated with attitudes. This finding is not consistent with previous research that indicates exposure to people with disabilities is associated with more positive attitudes.
- A clear association was found between communication with the state VR agency serving blind or visually impaired people and more positive attitudes. Although this finding does not prove that interactions with VR agency personnel *cause* employers to have more positive attitudes, it illustrates the importance of VR personnel having meaningful contact or relationships with employers.

Interviews with Successful Agencies

- Four state VR agencies that participated in the study had the following characteristics in common and therefore they are considered important characteristics of successful agencies:
 - Strong leadership support for the importance of developing relationships with businesses, treating them as customers, and for having a business relations program
 - Expectation that their rehabilitation counselors will interact with businesses as part of their jobs
 - Employ business relations staff who work both with consumers and businesses
 - Value the importance of training their staff about working with businesses
 - Use a modeling or mentoring approach to help rehabilitation counselors develop their skills in working with businesses
- Strategies administrators use to encourage rehabilitation counselors' interactions with businesses include: (a) stressing importance of business relations at initial hiring interview and throughout employment, (b) sharing rehabilitation counselors' success stories, (c) tracking counselors' business contacts, and (d) providing training about interacting with businesses.

- Direct contacts with businesses are necessary to overcome negative employer attitudes, which is considered the biggest challenge to building relationships. Types of contact suggested were providing education, demonstrating AT, providing disability awareness and sensitivity training, and facilitating paid work experiences for consumers.
- Significant challenges to working with businesses identified for rehabilitation counselors were lack of time, lack of comfort, and lack of knowledge/skill in how to interact with businesses.
- The most commonly mentioned agency actions that help counselors to work with businesses are providing training in the area and mentoring. The most suggested action that the agency could implement to help counselors is reduce their workload so they have time for this activity.
- Important strategies that emerged for working with businesses:
 - Networking – clearly the number one strategy used by successful VR personnel
 - Modeling behaviors/mentoring for counselors
 - Sponsoring trial work experiences for consumers
- According to employers, having a close working relationship with a representative of the agency was important. Although these can be considered agency-business relationships, they are usually one-to-one relationships between an agency representative and an employer.
- Employers advise VR agencies to do more community outreach and networking to get their agency's name out there, and also suggest attending human resources meetings and conferences.

Recommendations Based on Research Results

For Agencies

- Consider how VR staff perceptions about negative employer attitudes towards people with visual impairments may impact their interactions with businesses and consumers.
 Rehabilitation personnel who assume more negative attitudes from employers may be more apprehensive or even defensive when approaching potential employers, or may avoid employer contacts because they anticipate rejection. Perceptions about negative employer attitudes may be conveyed to consumers, thus influencing consumer behaviors toward and attitudes about both employers and employment.
- Thoroughly train VR personnel who work with employers about blindness/visual impairment and common job accommodations/assistive technology used by this population.

This research supports that VR personnel working with employers should establish relationships with employers and must have enough knowledge about blindness, job accommodations, and AT used by persons who are blind to discuss these issues candidly with employers. Staff new to working with this population should be provided with adequate training to provide this knowledge. This is as equally true for business relations staff as it is for rehabilitation counselors.

- Utilize on-the-job training and other forms of consumer work experiences as often as possible.

Given the large percentage of VR personnel in some agencies that report the effectiveness of utilizing on-the-job training or other forms of consumer work experiences, agencies who do not currently utilize this technique should consider it. It is a strategy that benefits both business and consumers, who are both customers that agencies are mandated to serve.
- Provide outreach to HR personnel to increase their knowledge.

Many HR personnel are not well informed about how to find information about job accommodations or AT for people who are blind or visually impaired and ongoing efforts to improve their knowledge are needed. An effort by rehabilitation professionals to target people in HR departments is also an important strategy to ensure that businesses get the correct information and referral sources for assistance with job accommodations.
- Create opportunities and time for VR personnel to make contacts with employers.

Employers who were referred by VR agencies had more knowledge about how specific job tasks could be performed, were more likely to know where to get information about job accommodations, and had better attitudes toward blind or visually impaired people as employees than employers who were randomly identified. These findings support the value for VR agencies of establishing relationships with employers. Establishing these relationships may take considerable time and effort but can result in positive benefits for blind or visually impaired consumers and successful agency outcomes.
- Encourage and support the development of meaningful relationships between VR staff and employers.

Allowing staff adequate time and opportunity to develop relationships with employers is vital to establishing meaningful relationships with those employers.
- Ensure that counselors are actually implementing the dual customer approach with employers.

An agency cannot meet the goal of utilizing the dual customer approach unless counselors are actually implementing it. Many counselors are not comfortable with and/or do not feel knowledgeable about how to interact with businesses.

These counselors will require training about how to work with businesses, and it is recommended that this training be ongoing.

- Recognize that developing business partners requires much time and effort and will be a long-term process that may require years to realize significant results.
In order to develop or build a business relations program, consider what is most feasible given the agency's resources and factors such as state characteristics (e.g., size of state, urban vs. rural nature, characteristics of business within state, state government's support of hiring persons with disabilities) and develop long-term plans that capitalize on potential strengths.
- Consider and evaluate rehabilitation counselor applicants' ability, or potential, to interact with business when making hiring decisions.
People with some experience in business, sales, or HRM may be more comfortable with this activity.
- Consider the ability to interact with business as an important factor when promoting staff to supervisory positions.
Modeling of the behavior by supervisors was found to be important in helping counselors develop these skills.
- Ensure that genuine support for the business relations program exists from the top down.
Top leadership's commitment to and belief in the business relations model or dual customer approach is extremely important for agency success in implementing the dual customer approach.
- Develop a clear way to convey the message of the importance of interacting with businesses to staff.
Consider: do you have specific, clear requirements for business contacts or other relevant activities that are part of staff performance measures?
- Share business outreach results agency-wide and keep staff in all areas of the state aware of what is happening.
Connections with a business in one location may offer opportunities to develop that business relationship in another area of the state. It is important to establish a routine method of ongoing sharing of this information and to facilitate collaboration among staff.
- Provide ongoing training to staff about how to interact with businesses.
In one agency that temporarily halted its training in this area, counselors who had not had training were clearly less comfortable working with businesses and reported performing the activity less frequently.
- Focus training on helping counselors reframe the way they view business interactions – from considering it a sales approach to considering it developing a relationship with an individual, who happens to be an employer.

The same skills that allow rehabilitation counselors to succeed in counseling consumers can be used to approach and work with employers.

- Provide mentoring to new staff about how to interact with businesses.
This mentoring should include modeling of the behavior. Developing a formal mentoring program, with performance expectations for the mentors, may be beneficial.
- Partner with other organizations to improve ability to fill workforce demands for businesses you have a relationship with (e.g., partner with the general VR agency, CRPs, or other organizations that place people in jobs).
- Develop relationships with businesses *before* identifying a consumer to place there.
This alleviates the technology compatibility issue and may reduce employer resistance – you are not trying to place someone in a job, just talking to them – and it provides the opportunity to offer assistance with current employee job retention.
- Ensure that assistive technology needed by newly hired employees who are blind or visually impaired is immediately available.
If an employer is told that AT will allow a new employee to perform the job and decides to give a consumer a chance, that AT must be available on the employee's first day of work. Consider: does your agency have a policy in place to allow this to happen? One possibility is having "loaner" AT available within the agency, that could be used until permanent AT can be purchased for the employee.
- Encourage and support networking activities for all staff.
This includes allowing attendance at any appropriate networking event and paying for memberships in business organizations that offer networking opportunities.
- Focus on HRM departments as a good starting point for providing outreach to businesses.
- Require community outreach activities as part of staff responsibilities.
This will increase awareness of the agency and its mission within the community and provides opportunities for staff to meet employers engaged in community service. Consider making connections with organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, Rotary, Red Cross, United Way, Lions Club, or other local community organizations.
- Utilize connections with employers in job retention cases as opportunities to develop a long-term business relationship.
This may not apply for small businesses or ones with very specific or highly skilled jobs, but all other job retention cases should be treated as potential business partners.

- Differentiate between expectations for counselors to (1) develop new relationships with businesses and (2) provide services in job retention cases or to established business partners.

A different set of skills is needed for handling employer interactions on a job retention case than for developing new relationships with businesses.

Developing new relationships will likely require more time, and counselors typically do not have time for extensive business development activities. Job retention cases provide opportunities to develop and expand an existing relationship.

- Ensure that all rehabilitation counselors are able to provide the needed services in job retention cases and understand how to treat that business as a customer of the agency.
- *For combined agencies:* Train all business relations staff about blindness/low vision issues and assistive technology to ensure that business relations staff within the agency understand the abilities of people who are blind/visually impaired.

A special effort should be made to educate business relations staff, to enable them to use the blindness-specific techniques with businesses shown to be important in our study. If multiple business relations staff are employed, have a designated specialist for the blind and visually impaired population.

For Counselors

- Evaluate your own attitudes about employers and consider how those attitudes may impact interactions with business and consumers.

Do not assume employers have a negative attitude – give them a chance by providing the education they need to understand how people who are blind or visually impaired can perform the job. Presenting a positive impression of employers will be helpful to consumers; rather than focusing on employers that you have had negative experiences with, encourage consumers with stories about positive employer experiences.

- Remember to take the employer’s perspective and encourage consumers to do the same.

Having good employees is essential to a business’ success, and businesses need employees who can perform their jobs. If they don’t understand how a blind person can perform a job, they won’t hire that person. You, and the consumer, need to help the employer understand how the job will get done.

- Present yourself to employers as a resource about job accommodations and educate employers about workplace accommodations, including AT, used by blind or visually impaired people.

You have knowledge that could convince an employer to give a person with a visual impairment a chance at a job or keep an employee who develops vision

loss – recognize the value of the information you have and share it with employers.

- Communicate with employers at every opportunity.
A primary implication of these findings is the importance of communicating with employers. Communication with employers provides an opportunity to increase their knowledge about blindness and about the accommodations and AT available to allow this population to be productive employees.
- Develop an ongoing relationship with employers based on initial communications.
Even if an employer had hired a blind employee and had some knowledge about how blind employees perform job tasks, communication with VR was still associated with more positive attitudes of employers, and is therefore very important. One reason for this may be the support and assurance that VR personnel can provide to the employer – that they will be there if needed. Interviews with employers who have worked with VR agencies cite this support as an essential part of their relationship.
- Use demonstration of how a blind person can perform job tasks with employers.
When interacting with employers, it is important for VR professionals to remember that exposure that involves demonstration of how a blind person could perform a task is more likely to be effective in improving attitudes than general exposure to people who are blind or visually impaired.
- Be aware that how you interact with businesses (the approach used) can make a difference for consumers.
Treating the business as a customer may result in more positive outcomes for consumers, and can therefore be an effective component of the total service delivery provided to consumers. Consider the potential positive impact you may have through interacting with employers.
- Utilize the three blindness-specific techniques described in the study (provide education, expose employers to blind/visually impaired people who are employed, provide referrals to other businesses that employ someone who is blind or visually impaired).
Implementing these blindness specific strategies will require that counselors be able to: articulate to employers how consumers who are blind or visually impaired use AT and perform routine job tasks, develop or maintain contact with employed consumers who can demonstrate their job skills, and participate in developing a pool of employers who can serve as references.

More Information

More detailed information about the research results and the methodology used is provided in the following publications. These publications are available for download

from The National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision's website (<http://blind.msstate.edu/research/nrtc-publications/2011-2015/>) or upon request.

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