

**Building Relationships with Businesses: Recommendations from Employers
Concerning Persons who are Blind/Visually Impaired**

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Abstract

With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the focus of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies' work with businesses and development of partnerships with employers will increase. This study explored employers' perspectives regarding their relationships with the VR agency to assist VR personnel in business development efforts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers and content analysis was performed on transcriptions from twelve usable responses. Employers discussed their relationships with the agency, additional supports needed, and provided advice to VR agencies developing relationships with businesses. Findings support previous studies and identify new information, including the importance of one-on-one relationships and utilizing connections from job retention cases.

Keywords: Employer Relationships, Business Relations Model, Dual Customer Approach, Blindness, Visual Impairment

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Building Relationships with Businesses: Recommendations from Employers Concerning Persons who are Blind/Visually Impaired

Negative employer attitudes are considered one of the biggest barriers to employment for consumers who are blind or visually impaired (McDonnall, Zhou, & Crudden, 2013; Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden, Williams, McBroom, & Moore, 2002; Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997; Salomone & Paige, 1984). The limited amount of research that has been conducted with employers on this topic supports that employers have negative attitudes towards this population (Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984; Williams, 1972) and that employers believe it would be difficult to hire people who are blind to work at their business (Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans, & Peterson, 2000; Inglis, 2006). Addressing negative employer attitudes may be challenging, but, because state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are charged with maximizing the employment, personal independence, and community and vocational integration of persons with disabilities across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), the state agency interactions with businesses provide an opportunity to address employer attitudes.

In the past decade the importance of VR agencies developing relationships with businesses, as one component of their multiple efforts to promote employment and vocational integration for persons with disabilities, has increased. Although VR agencies have always interacted with businesses to help consumers obtain employment, there is now a greater emphasis on developing long-term relationships, or partnerships, with businesses to help multiple consumers obtain employment with the same business (Anderson et al., 2006). This is referred to as the business relations model (BRM), or dual customer approach, which also emphasizes treating the business as a customer and responding to their needs. Implementation of this model promotes cultivating relationships with larger businesses with the expectation that

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these relationships can be leveraged to place persons with various disabilities at multiple sites and across a range of occupations. For example, a relationship with a regional or national hotel chain might facilitate placements in multiple cities in various positions throughout the hotels, depending on the needs of the business and the skills of the potential employee. Although smaller employers may not be expected to hire multiple consumers, the BRM supports truly considering the needs of these employers and providing ongoing support to them, as needed. Although this is not a new concept (e.g., Fry, 1997; Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999), VR agencies have recently received encouragement from the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) to embrace this approach. The recently passed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (P. L. 113-128) made substantial changes to the state-federal VR program, including placing a strong emphasis on business engagement and requiring VR agencies to describe in their state plans how they will work with businesses (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), thus further stressing the importance of developing relationships with businesses.

Research with Employers

Several authors have conducted studies with employers to discuss the employment of people with disabilities. Most of these studies had a different focus from the present study, such as determining the characteristics of employers open to hiring people with disabilities (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003), employer perspectives about problems hiring people with disabilities (Stensrud, 2007), or employer experiences with workers with disabilities (Hernandez, McDonald, Divilbiss, Horin, Velcoff & Donoso, 2008). One study had a similar focus as the present study: the development of relationships between VR agencies and employers in Australia (Buys & Rennie, 2001). The authors identified several factors important to building

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effective partnerships, including making financial incentives available to employers for hiring people with disabilities, treating the employer as a customer by identifying and meeting their needs, and achieving a high level of professional competence and responsiveness among agency staff in relation to client placement and follow-up. Trust and reciprocal benefits were important aspects of long-term relationships that were maintained over time.

Only two studies were located that specifically discussed the employment of people who are blind or visually impaired with employers. One study focused on employers' experiences with employees who are visually impaired, with five major themes identified: importance of accommodations and assistive technology (AT), employer satisfaction with the employees, anticipated challenges, actual challenges experienced, and how hiring decisions were made (Wolffe & Candela, 2002). The second study focused on how this population can overcome barriers to employment, including negative employer attitudes, and included focus groups of employers (Cruden et al., 2002). Employers reported that it is helpful to have a third party, such as VR personnel, establish a relationship with the employer, provide education, facilitate positive exposure to someone who is blind or visually impaired, provide support as needed, including assistance with AT, and remain in contact with the employer.

Another related study involving this population did not include employers, but instead assessed VR personnel's perspectives on employer attitudes and the best way to encourage an employer to consider hiring someone who is blind or visually impaired (McDonnall et al., 2013). Key strategies according to VR personnel were providing information about blindness and AT, using on-the-job training or other work experiences, focusing on the consumer's qualifications and abilities rather than disability, assuring ongoing support to the business, establishing a relationship with the business and focusing on their needs, and using demonstration.

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Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to learn from employers who have hired someone who is blind or visually impaired and who work with VR agencies what is important to them about their relationship with the VR agency. With the exception of Buys and Rennie (2001), other studies with employers have not had this focus. Specific information we sought to gather was (a) how the relationship was established, (b) what the employers want from the relationship, (c) problems experienced in their relationship, and (d) advice for other agencies about how to develop relationships with businesses, including suggestions for the initial approach to businesses. This information is meant to help VR agencies and personnel within agencies who want to develop relationships with businesses.

Methodology

Participants

Three state VR agencies that participated in a previous research project concerning their employer interaction practices provided contact information for three or more employers who had a relationship with their agency. The three VR agencies were selected based on their reported emphasis on working with employers by utilizing the BRM approach and their success in placing blind and visually impaired consumers. Two of the state agencies serve only consumers who are blind or visually impaired while the third serves persons with all disabilities. Contact information was obtained for 19 employers (ten from one state, six from the second, and three from the third) and 13 interviews were conducted (seven from one state, three each from the remaining two states); attempts to complete interviews with the other six employers were not successful. Of the completed interviews, four were hospitals or health care related companies, four were call centers within various types of businesses, three were schools or colleges, one a

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development corporation, and one a private community rehabilitation provider (CRP) serving persons with visual disabilities. Upon contact, the employer at the development corporation had no employees who were blind and contributed no substantive information. Consequently, a total of twelve employers generated useable data for the project.

All respondents were involved in the hiring process for employees but had different job titles such as supervisor, equal employment opportunity manager, principal, human resources manager, senior vice president, and associate director. The smallest employer was the CRP with 25 employees and the largest was a managed care group employing approximately 8,000 people. The number of employees who are blind or visually impaired at each company ranged from one to 20 persons; the employer with the largest number of employees who are blind or visually impaired was a large Veteran's Administration hospital. Two of the respondents were blind.

Data Collection

We used qualitative data collection strategies for this project so that we could learn employers' thoughts, perceptions, and opinions about their relationships with VR agencies and to gain greater understanding of the dynamics of that relationship. To gather that information we developed a semi-structured interview protocol that was reviewed by an expert in building relationships with businesses prior to data collection. Interview items were tailored to address the purpose of the study. Employers were contacted by email or telephone and appointments scheduled for subsequent data collection interviews. During those interviews employers were read a statement of informed consent and asked a series of open-ended questions concerning their relationship with the state rehabilitation agency and their advice for state agencies about how to contact and interact with employers to facilitate employment of persons who are blind or

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visually impaired (see Table 1 for the list of questions). Each interview was audio recorded and recordings were transcribed for analysis. Employers received no incentive for participation.

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Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were loaded into a qualitative software program (MAXQDA) for analysis. Software programs are increasingly used for qualitative data analysis as they facilitate coding and retrieving segments of data and promote accuracy in identifying and tallying the coded segments. Using a grounded theory approach, all transcriptions were reviewed and segments were coded into broad categories using inductive and deductive analysis, where some categories corresponded to the research questions under investigation and other categories emerged from the data. Second level coding of responses in each category was conducted using principles of content analysis. Consequently, within each theme similarities and variations in responses were identified and then tallied. To promote reliability and validity, two researchers were engaged in this coding process and the subsequent identification of specific themes.

Results

How Relationship Was Established

Five of the twelve employers reported that their relationship with the VR agency was established when a current employee began experiencing a visual impairment. Four of these five employees were already VR consumers, and the VR agency worked with the employer to assist the individual in retaining the job. In the fifth case, the employer learned about VR from a manager within her company and contacted VR for job retention assistance. In this employer-

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initiated contact case, one of the managers at the business was familiar with the VR agency's services, and thought the agency could be of assistance. The employer expressed appreciation that the manager was aware of VR services, reporting that this large business's HR department was not aware of the resources VR could offer.

Three employers (25%) wanted to hire people with disabilities; two of them made the initial contact with the VR agency as part of their recruitment efforts. The third employer worked with a person who was blind at a previous job and was interested in hiring that person, who was currently unemployed, at a new business. The consumer initiated contact with the VR counselor, who then contacted the employer. Finally, a community rehabilitation provider (CRP) that works specifically with blind and visually impaired individuals won a contract for the telecommunications division of a hospital and this CRP worked closely with the VR agency to employ consumers in many of those positions. (That contract no longer exists and the employees who are blind or visually impaired are employed directly by the hospital, whose representative participated in the interview.)

Two employers have dual relationships with the state VR agency: in addition to employing their clients, one is a CRP that contracts with VR and the other is an educational institution whose students are provided support by VR. Because the employers seemed to view their primary relationship with VR as being these alternate roles, rather than support to them as an employer of their clients, their answers are not included in the discussion of the relationships between VR and employers, but are included elsewhere when applicable. For the final employer, the origin of the relationship was unknown as the visually impaired employee was already there when the employer joined the company. It is relevant to note that none of the employers in our study reported that the relationship began by VR initiating contact and developing a relationship

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with them directly, other than job retention cases in which VR had a relationship with the consumer.

Extent of Relationship

All employers with the exception of one reported very positive experiences with the VR agencies, but the extent of the relationship described by the employers varied considerably. Half of the employers (5 of the 10 responses included in this section, with the two employers with dual relationships removed) described an ongoing relationship with the VR agencies. Four of these five employers described a close relationship with a particular representative of the agency. One described a strong previous relationship that did not involve ongoing contact, three described a previous limited relationship that did not involve ongoing contact, and one reported no personal contact with the VR agency.

Employers who described a limited relationship with VR indicated that the primary relationship was between the employee who was blind or visually impaired and the VR agency. Although they were very happy with the services VR was able to provide, they did not feel they had a relationship with the VR agency and there was no follow-up or ongoing contact. The four employers who did not report an ongoing relationship with the agency stated that they would be open to hiring other people with visual disabilities.

Important Aspects of Relationship with VR

We asked what the VR agency does that makes the employer want to continue working with them and what the employer wanted from the relationships with the VR agency. Some employers who reported limited direct involvement with VR did not provide a response to these questions. Although responses varied, a few common themes emerged. The most common factor, mentioned by six employers, is that their agency contact person is available when needed, is

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responsive to requests, and is supportive. Some people talked specifically about the follow-up provided. This comment is representative of those employer responses:

I think it would be that support and that they're here for us and they're available.

They're a phone call away or an email away. I think that support is important.

One aspect of support provided by the VR agency that most employers mentioned was help with assistive technology (AT), which is often vital to enabling blind or visually impaired individuals to perform their jobs. Multiple employers mentioned that VR staff help them with accessibility issues with JAWS (a common screen reader software) and with purchasing new equipment:

They've brought out numerous personnel to work with us on how to use the JAWS software with our software, which by the way is custom... They came out and learned the software and determined how to make JAWS work with it so that we could employ these folks, and they've been so key in helping us train.

Four employers discussed the importance of their relationship with a specific person from the agency. It was clear that they had close working relationships that involved trust; some even mentioned personal relationships that developed:

I would tell them that relationships are everything. If you can get out and meet the folks with those agencies and develop a relationship, and them have an understanding of what you're looking for in employees that makes all the difference in the world to me. Sally has been, not only key in all of this for the six [blind employees] that we have now, but I consider her a close personal friend now, and I know that if she's making a recommendation to me for a new employee that she has my best interest in mind and she's got the candidate that she thinks is the best fit for the job.

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Close working relationships enable the employer to speak candidly with the VR representative, which is important given the problem with negative employer attitudes and lack of knowledge about this population:

Tom is so easy to work with and we can speak with him candidly, which is nice because sometimes I think employers get afraid. "Can I talk about this? Can I discuss any hurdles that we might be having?" He takes away all that concern. He makes himself very available.

Another important factor mentioned was follow-up to ensure that the employee is doing well. Three employers discussed the importance of the VR agency following-up after providing their initial recommendations. Three employers also discussed the importance of referring the right people to the employer – this included making sure they are qualified and that they truly want to work:

The other part I really think would be when they recommend folks for positions, make darn sure the person is actually qualified for the position before you recommend them. ...It's important that the agency does some screening ahead of time to make sure that the person is capable of doing the job. Again...the very worst thing that can happen is to get someone in who turns out to either be a poor employee or unable to do the job. Unfortunately, people will start to be more reluctant to hire people with a disability because of that.

The importance of the VR agency understanding the business perspective, being aware of the employer's needs, and helping both sides was discussed by two employers. Being accommodating and easy to work with was also mentioned as an important factor by two employers.

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Problems Encountered/Additional Support Needed

Employers were asked whether they had problems working with the VR agency and whether there was any additional support the agency could provide. All employers with the exception of one indicated they did not experience any problems. The employer with a problem stated that she called her agency point of contact and left several messages which were not returned. When she called the main phone number for the agency, she was informed that her point of contact had retired. The employer stated: *“It’s not that she had to tell me she was retiring...but it would have been nice if she would have told me she was retiring.”*

In terms of additional support that could be provided that would help the employer hire and retain individuals who are blind or visually impaired, five employers had comments. Interestingly, three employers responded to this question from the perspective of what the agency could do for the employees who are blind or visually impaired. Two respondents suggested providing those employees more help with transportation to and from work and one suggested providing more updated equipment for the employees (to include informing the business about updated equipment so they can purchase it). The employer who reported no direct contact with VR suggested providing more education about what blindness is and how to make accommodations. Another employer had several suggestions, including creating a standardized proficiency rating in areas such as reading braille and using a screen reader to access the computer and providing that for applicants; having a team from the VR agency job shadow for the positions they want to suggest consumers for; having daily meetings once the employee begins the job and a more formal evaluation after the employee has been on the job 30, 60, and 90 days. The purpose of the meetings and evaluation would be to help the employee meet productivity goals (which involved specific goals in a fast-paced work environment).

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Employers' Advice to VR Agencies

The most common response regarding what advice they would give to VR agencies that want to develop relationships with businesses was doing more employer outreach to make businesses aware of their services. They identified lack of knowledge of the services available from the VR agency as the primary problem, with the belief that if employers just knew about the services, they would be interested. Several discussed the importance of networking in the community, such as at Chamber of Commerce meetings. Another common response was to contact HR departments and attend their conferences to become better known to that group. One suggested attending the state Society for Human Resource Management conference:

They should go and have equipment on display because these HR people are coming there. They could even get in on the conference and do a session on these things and that would be a way to get to more employers through the HR group...

Several employers discussed the importance of demonstrating to businesses what people who are blind can do, because most sighted people do not understand how a person who is blind can perform some tasks without seeing it for themselves. Several employers mentioned the importance of the first contact, including a face-to-face contact initially, and maintaining ongoing contact with the employer.

Best Way to Approach Businesses

Employers provided a variety of answers regarding the best way to approach a business about employing someone who is blind or visually impaired. The most common response was providing education about accommodations and discussing how the person can perform the job.

This is a response from an employer who has a visually impaired employee:

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I think they would have to start with how this person would be able to utilize the tools that we need and the skills that we need. They would have to really focus on that. If they're totally blind and not visually impaired, they would need to really explain how that person would operate a computer system.

Several people suggested talking to HR first and explaining the services that the agency can provide. This was one HR person's response:

Well, you know, before Rachel contacted me, I didn't even know that these services were available and hadn't really worked with anyone in VR. That initial outreach or just "Hey! We're here. Here's what we can provide" kind of a thing.

Other recommendations made by individual employers were to use success stories and business-to-business referrals, demonstrations at a worksite, offer unpaid internships, and focus on the consumer's qualifications and abilities.

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to learn about established relationships between employers and VR agencies from the employers' perspectives to inform other VR agencies and their personnel about how to develop relationships with employers. Many of our results reinforce results from previous studies that involved discussions with employers, but our results also reveal new information. In terms of what employers want from their relationship with the VR agency, the most common response was for their agency contact person to be there when needed, be responsive to requests, and be supportive. This, along with the importance of following-up after providing initial recommendations and remaining in contact, coincides with findings from other studies with employers (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Crudden et al., 2002; Hernandez et al., 2008). These features of the relationship may be even more important when the consumer is

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someone who is blind or visually impaired as support for AT is often needed and is frequently an ongoing need as business software changes. Checking in with employers and employed consumers about AT issues, including using one employer's suggestion of providing them with information about new technology, can be a method counselors use to develop ongoing relationships with employers. Employers were also gratified to have assistance with screening and selecting qualified candidates for positions and having an agency representative with whom they could have candid conversations about hiring or retaining someone who is blind or visually impaired.

A key finding from this study that has not been explicitly explored in other publications was the importance of the employer's one-on-one relationship with their agency representative. The importance of trust in the relationship has been discussed (Buys & Rennie, 2001), but the depth of the relationship has not. Of the five employers who reported an ongoing relationship with the VR agency, four spoke about the importance of their relationship with a specific person. Employer comments illustrated close working relationships, and several discussed strong personal connections between themselves and the agency representative. A relationship of this type would obviously need to develop over time and would require an interest on the part of the employer, which not all will have. The development of a personal relationship between a VR professional and employer may not happen with all businesses that the agency works with, but this could be considered the ideal outcome. It will require additional effort on the VR professional's part and their time.

The only employer who reported a problem with the VR agency was one who had an ongoing relationship with the agency but did not mention a close relationship with a specific person. When her VR contact person stopped returning calls because she retired, she neglected to

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let the employer know. This example can serve as a reminder to VR agencies to ensure that employer contacts of staff who retire or otherwise leave their positions not be forgotten. It also brings up a potential issue with developing employer relationships, particularly if a close relationship has been established – when one member in the relationship leaves his or her position, that connection between the VR agency and business may be jeopardized.

It is interesting that when asked about additional support that the VR agency could provide to help the employer hire and retain people who are blind or visually impaired, the majority of employers who provided a response answered from the perspective of what the agency could do for their current employees who are blind or visually impaired. Although assisting with transportation may not be a viable option for consumers whose cases are closed (as two employers suggested), it is noteworthy that employers viewed providing continued support to their current employees as an important thing for the VR agency to do. It is certainly easier for ongoing support to occur when a relationship exists between the employer and the agency.

In terms of advice to other agencies seeking to develop relationships with employers, our respondents thought that it was important to make businesses aware of their services (because most are not) and to make them aware of how people who are blind can perform work tasks by using demonstration. Using demonstration was also an important strategy recommended by employers in Crudden et al.'s study (2002). Outreach in the community and to businesses, including direct contact with HR departments, were common suggestions in the present study. The most often mentioned suggestion for the best way to initially approach an employer was providing education about accommodations and discussing how the person could perform the job. Approaching HR first was advised by several, as was using face-to-face contact. These recommendations, along with the other recommendations made by individual employers, are all

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supported by recommendations made by VR staff regarding how to encourage an employer to consider hiring someone who is blind or visually impaired (McDonnall et al., 2013). Because employers and counselors have independently identified the same or similar suggestions regarding establishing employer relationships, the validity of these practices is supported. It also illustrates that some VR personnel are already aware of the best ways to approach an employer.

Our findings differ from other studies in that we looked closely at how the relationship between the agency and employer was established and the extent of the relationship. We found that although almost all employers were positive about their experience with VR, several employers referred by agencies did not consider themselves to have an ongoing relationship with that agency. Some reported very limited, or no direct involvement, and other employers were not willing to participate in the study. These findings raise the issue of differences between VR personnel and employers' perspectives about their relationships. VR agencies were asked to provide contact information for three or more employers who they had established a relationship with, yet some of these employers interviewed for this study did not report an ongoing relationship with the VR agency.

The relationships described by the employers did not involve new business development as often conceptualized with the BRM approach; VR did not approach the employers to initiate a relationship without a precipitating event. Three employers specifically wanted to recruit people with disabilities and two approached the VR agency to request their assistance in this effort. Five employers became involved with the agency due to a current employee developing a visual impairment, and only one of these resulted in an ongoing relationship with the agency. Although all were happy with the services the agency was able to provide, the VR representative did not attempt to continue their relationship. Some employers viewed the relationship with the VR

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agency as something that exists between the employee and the VR agency, with the employer less engaged in that dynamic. While this does not capitalize on the BRM approach, it may reflect the perspective of an empowered consumer who is actively engaged in their own rehabilitation. The employer who was an equal employment opportunity manager in her business' HR department stated that the VR representative should have continued the relationship by maintaining contact with her. That all four of the employers who reported only a previous relationship with the agency expressed a willingness to consider hiring additional people who are blind or visually impaired indicates a missed opportunity by these VR agencies to establish an ongoing relationship with the employers.

Limitations

Whenever research participants are not randomly sampled for participation in a research project the potential for bias in selection of the participants exists. In this case, however, the primary purpose of the research was to investigate the relationships between employers and VR agencies. To pursue this investigation, we relied on VR agencies to identify employers with whom they had established relationships. Despite efforts to generate a purposive sample of employers meeting this criteria, some employers had a more limited relationship with the VR agency than anticipated. Consequently, the data generated from this sample may not be generalizable to other employers working with state VR agencies. However, consistent with the concept of transferability, readers may infer from the results presented here what they might find in similar situations.

In analyzing qualitative data, the researchers analyze the data through their own lens and thus can bring bias to their interpretation of results. Content analysis typically is regarded as a qualitative data analysis strategy that is less biased than interpretive strategies, and the data was

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examined by two trained researchers using a qualitative software program in an effort to promote objectivity in data analysis. However, in the coding and classification process there is the possibility that participants' meaning was misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Implications and Conclusions

Despite the limitations, these findings offer important implications for VR agencies and their personnel who work with employers. The importance of a strong personal connection between the employer and VR agency representative suggests that VR personnel should approach employers from the perspective of getting to know them, understanding their needs, and begin developing a relationship with them, rather than from the perspective of trying to sell them something, which is the way many VR counselors currently view business development (McDonnall, 2014). The suggested approach should be more comfortable for many counselors as it parallels working with consumers and makes use of their counseling skills. These findings also lend support for the importance of carefully tracking employer contacts and developing plans to transition employer relationships to other staff when counselors or business relations personnel leave the agency or move to other positions. Agencies are well aware that another professional needs to take over responsibility for a counselor's consumer caseload when he or she leaves, but they must not forget to do the same with employer contacts. If they do, they risk losing that relationship forever. Ideally, the VR professional who is leaving should communicate this to his or her employer contacts and introduce the new VR representative who can continue providing services to the employer.

We do not know if the examples in our study are typical of how employer relationships are developed by VR agencies or if they are anomalies. We do know that new business development requires a significant amount of time, which some VR agencies may not have the

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personnel to support. Regardless of whether agencies have the resources to support new business development, all VR agencies should be prepared to handle requests from employers for assistance with recruiting or retaining employees who are blind or visually impaired, and have their staff fully prepared to treat the employer as a customer. Continued follow-up with an employer in a job retention case is vital. In most of the job retention cases the VR agencies did not explore the possibility of the employer hiring additional persons who are blind or visually impaired, although employers indicated they would consider doing so. VR agencies would be wise to capitalize on their successes in helping businesses retain good employees and pursue potential opportunities to generate placements for additional consumers with receptive employers who have already hired or retained employees who are blind or visually impaired. This represents a cost-effective way to establish an ongoing relationship with a business.

For agencies who do have the desire and resources to develop new business relationships, these employers recommended doing more employer outreach. Several suggested targeting HR personnel within businesses. A good way to reach a large number of them is through attendance at state conferences or meetings. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management has national, state, and even local meetings that VR personnel can attend and potentially make presentations. Another suggestion for employer outreach was networking in the community, such as through meetings that involve local businesses. These are important activities that VR personnel should be engaging in to develop business relationships. VR agencies should recognize that providing outreach to new businesses or services to employers they are already working with requires time, and counselors who do these activities must be given the time and support necessary to include them along with their other responsibilities.

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Important components of the relationship between VR and the employer, from the employers' perspective, along with employer recommendations to VR agencies, have been described in this report. While this research focused specifically on relations with businesses concerning VR consumers who are blind or visually impaired, many of these strategies may be applicable to persons with other disabilities. With the passage of the WIOA legislation, engaging with businesses is no longer optional, it is a clear and important requirement for the VR system. The findings and implications presented in this study can help VR agencies as they work to improve their business relations programs and develop relationships with employers in their communities.

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Table 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Tell me a little bit about your business and your employees. (Prompts: how many employees, type of business)

What is your position?

How many employees do you have who are blind or visually impaired?

Tell me about how your relationship with the agency was established.

What does the agency do that makes you want to continue the relationship?

Did you have concerns about hiring someone who is blind? (as opposed to someone with another type of disability)

If yes, how were those concerns addressed by the agency?

What is the best way to approach a business about blind employees? (Would this be any different for an employee with any other type of disability?)

What additional support could the agency provide that would help you with hiring and retaining persons who are blind/visually impaired?

Have you experienced any problems in working with the agency?

If yes, how were they resolved?

How could your relationship with the agency be improved?

What do you want from your relationship with the agency (in a nutshell, to share with other agencies)?

What advice would you give to other agencies that would like to develop relationships with businesses in their area (e.g., things to do to begin and maintain a good relationship)?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about employing people who are blind/visually impaired or about working with the agency?

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