

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

### What Were We Trying to Learn?

With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), it is more important than ever for VR agencies to develop long-term partnerships with businesses to increase employment for individuals with B/VI. Such partnerships can help overcome one of the biggest barriers to employment for these individuals: negative employer attitudes.

This project explored the VR-business relationship from the employer's point of view. A group of employers, identified by a VR agency as currently employing at least one previous agency consumer with B/VI, were asked to describe their relationships with the agency. They were also asked about the ingredients that go into a strong VR agency-employer relationship and to make recommendations on how VR agencies can develop new relationships with employers.

### What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

Overall, employers reported very positive experiences with VR. However, the extent of the relationship varied considerably among employers, with half reporting an ongoing relationship with the VR agency. Employers who said they had a more limited relationship with VR agencies indicated that the primary relationship was between the employee with B/VI and the agency. Although they were happy with the services provided by VR, they did not consider themselves to have a relationship with the VR agency.

Only one of the employers reported having a negative experience with VR. When asked to describe their complaint, this employer said she placed several calls to the VR representative she'd worked with and never received a response. When the employer finally called the VR main line, she was told that the person had retired, and the agency had failed to inform the employer of this fact.

When asked specifically about the factors that facilitate strong employer-VR relationships, employers gave a variety of responses that could be sorted into themes. Employers appreciated working with VR counselors who:

- Developed a personal, one-on-one relationship with the employer
- Were supportive and responsive to the employer's needs
- Provided assistance with assistive technology (AT)
- Fostered candid conversations with employers when questions and concerns arose
- Provided regular follow-up services to ensure employees were doing well

### Research Takeaway

Increasingly, vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are recognizing the importance of working closely with businesses in order to more effectively secure employment for consumers with blindness and visual impairments (B/VI). In this study, employers were asked about the best ways for VR counselors to build and maintain relationships with businesses. Employers reported that they appreciated one-on-one relationships with VR counselors who were available, easy to talk to, and who provided regular follow-up. When asked how VR counselors can develop relationships with new business partners, employers recommended more community outreach and attending business meetings or conferences to make them aware of the services VR has to offer.

- Referred job candidates who were qualified and truly ready to work
- Understood the business perspective and were aware of the employer's needs

Employers were also asked how VR agencies could provide additional support that would enable businesses to hire and retain individuals with B/VI. Employers recommended that VR agencies provide more assistance with transportation, updated AT for employees, and more education to employers about blindness and available accommodations.

When asked how VR counselors could develop new relationships with businesses, employers recommended counselors provide community outreach and attend large gatherings of employers, such as Chamber of Commerce meetings or Society of Human Resources Management conferences. The employers indicated the belief that most businesses don't know about VR and the services they can provide, and that if more employers knew about these services, they would be interested in using them. By attending employer gatherings, VR counselors can make large numbers of businesses aware of their services and also demonstrate for them the workplace capabilities of individuals with B/VI.

When approaching a business about hiring someone with B/VI, employers recommended VR counselors provide education about accommodations and discuss how the job candidate could perform the job. Several employers suggested that counselors make HR their first point of contact and that, whenever possible, the first contact should be face-to-face (rather than through cold calls or email).

### **How Do These Findings Relate to Me?**

- The importance of a strong personal connection between VR agencies and employers suggests VR personnel should approach businesses from the perspective of getting to know them and understanding their needs, rather than from the perspective of trying to sell them something.
- Employers appreciate having a strong relationship with a VR counselor that lasts beyond the initial placement process. Counselors should make a point of following up on the consumers they've placed. Such follow-up builds trust with employers and could potentially lead to additional job placements for future consumers.
- In order to develop new relationships with businesses, VR counselors should network as much as possible. Attending meetings of employers and/or human resources officers can be highly beneficial. When possible, counselors can give presentations that highlight VR services and the workplace potential of individuals with B/VI.
- When a counselor retires or leaves the agency, the agency should be sure to notify their employer contacts of this change. Better still, before the counselor leaves, he or she should introduce employers to the VR counselor who will serve as their new point of contact. VR agencies should ensure that the employer contacts of staff who retire or leave their positions are not forgotten.

### **How Was This Project Carried Out?**

Three state VR agencies were asked to provide contact information for employers with whom they have a positive relationship. These employers were contacted to participate in semi-structured interviews. A total of 12 interviews were used for this study.

### **Learn More**

Findings were taken from the following article:

McDonnall, M. C., & Crudden, A. (2015). Building relationships with businesses: Recommendations from employers concerning persons who are blind/visually impaired. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(3), 43-50.

For more information about this project, see the project overview page: Effectiveness of VR Agency-Employer Interaction Practices, available on our website at [blind.msstate.edu](http://blind.msstate.edu).

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