

Research Report

**Transition to Work:
Rehabilitation Counselor Perspectives**

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Transition to Work: Rehabilitation Counselor Perspectives

An exploratory approach was used to investigate factors about transition service delivery and its impact on employment outcomes for vocational rehabilitation agency consumers with visual disabilities. This is a summary of the comments made by rehabilitation counselors about consumers who successfully transitioned to competitive employment and factors that impacted this transition.

Procedure

An interview guide using open-ended questions was developed as a navigational tool to ensure that relevant topics were addressed, such as experience with the educational system, consumer characteristics, family involvement, and the consumer-counselor relationship. These interview strategies were developed to obtain a detailed picture of factors typically associated with the transition process.

Two states were selected for participation based upon an evaluation of the vocational rehabilitation agencies' RSA-911 Case Service Reports from the two most recent fiscal years. Data for the RSA-911 Case Service Reports is submitted by each state agency to the federal funding agency, the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Criteria for states included having closed a minimum of 30 transition age consumers (those who were age 21 or younger at application for services) with blindness as their primary disability and the state having at least a 90% competitive employment rate for all closures. Seven combined agencies and seven separate agencies met the criteria; two of these state agencies were contacted and agreed to participate in the project.

Agency administrators provided names and contact for rehabilitation counselors who had served consumers who participated in the transition process and whose cases

were closed after placement in competitive employment. A total of ten counselors participated in telephone interviews, six from the separate agency state and four from the combined agency state. Counselors were asked to make their responses about a specific consumer rather than generalizing their information from their wider experience base of multiple consumers. Counselor responses are summarized below.

School Systems

All counselors reported either positive or no experience with the school systems. Counselors reporting no contact with the school system attributed this to the consumer being out of school when the counselor received the referral. Counselors reported that school systems provided consumers training in use of assistive techniques and devices, orientation and mobility services, technology skills, job coaches, braille, and some employment experiences, such as part time employment, supported employment, or summer work experiences. When the school system was involved, it shared copies of the Individual Educational Plans (IEP) and other assessments and typically informed counselors when IEP meetings were scheduled. Visits to consumer work sites, consulting with job coaches, and maintaining school sponsored work after graduation are examples of activities where counselors and school systems worked together.

Consumer Characteristics

Counselors reported that good social and communication skills, supportive parents, personal determination, and a good work ethic were factors that typically promoted successful employment outcomes among consumers. Consumers were described as good communicators who were active in the transition and rehabilitation process and motivated to work and be independent. There did not appear to be an

interpretable pattern among consumers regarding previous work experience; some had none until completing secondary education while others engaged in volunteer work, summer work programs, or facility-based employment. Job accommodations to assist with transition included job coaching, aids and appliances, and technology. Other services included supported employment, center-based skills training, and on-the-job training.

Family Involvement

When discussing the transition and rehabilitation process, counselors repeatedly mentioned the role of the family, particularly the parents. Counselors indicated that parents provided emotional support, served as advocates, and encouraged independence. Parents were particularly involved in providing transportation and networking to secure employment experiences; three of the counselors reported that a parent secured employment for the consumer. Two counselors reported negative experiences with parents; one indicated the parent was too difficult and had a negative impact on the transition and rehabilitation process, and the other counselor stated the parent was overprotective. Other counselors praised families and noted that parents managed to provide support in difficult circumstances. Parents were regarded as having high expectations for their children, though it was recognized that some parents were very concerned about those expectations being realized.

Consumer-Counselor Relationship

There was variation in the number of contacts between the consumer and the counselor, with most counselors reporting seeing consumers only three to four times per year. Counselors all reported experiencing effective and positive relationships with

consumers, and generally described consumers as motivated and involved in the rehabilitation and transition process; only one counselor said that the consumer was unhappy with the rehabilitation agency. One counselor attributed the positive relationship to understanding each consumer on multiple levels, such as the home, the school, and at work, but other counselors stated that the ability to see the consumer more often and/or being able to work with the consumer earlier in the process would have enhanced their relationships. Four counselors noted the importance of implementing transition services early as an important factor in transition success.

Limitations

Counselors who participated in this project were not randomly selected. Rather, they were counselors contacted from states who met defined criteria and who were identified as working with consumers who transitioned successfully into competitive employment. Results from this study cannot be generalized to another population or setting. However, stakeholders can review this information and evaluate it for possible transferability to their own agencies or situations.

Implications

Early transition planning and service delivery and coordination with the school system were identified as positive factors in promoting successful transition to competitive employment. When possible, it appears that counselors take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with educational systems. Yet, some counselors were not able to engage in collaboration with the school system or early transition planning due to initiation of services after the consumer had completed secondary education. Efforts to locate and serve youth with visual impairments must be increased to maximize the

effectiveness of transition and rehabilitation services. Consumer characteristics and parental expectations and participation are additional factors noted as impacting the transition and rehabilitation process. Consumer characteristics included traits like having a good work ethic, being a good communicator, and/or having personal determination. These factors may be linked to parental expectations and participation as these expectation and participation likely influence character development. This may be another reason to implement transition services early, because fostering positive expectations within the family when the consumer is young may influence long term career expectations. Further, some parents took an active role in identifying and securing employment for their children. Discussions about these options at an early age may promote increased attention to networking strategies and future planning for employment options.

Although counselors noted generally positive relationships with consumers, some stated a need for more contact and intensive collaboration. Counselors may find themselves limited to less frequent contact when their caseloads are heavy or when geographic issues make traveling to consumers expensive and time consuming. Efforts to identify which consumers are in need of more intensive contact should be initiated and resources allocated accordingly.