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Job Readiness Programs are Foundational to Successful Employment Outcomes

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It is widely known that persons who are blind or vision impaired struggle to be employed at the same rate as their sighted peers. Nationwide, vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs have been tasked with implementing services that promote competitive gainful employment for those with substantial disabilities. This article explores one agency's program to provide job readiness skills for consumers who are blind or visually impaired.

Factors that have been identified to help those who are blind or visually impaired to gain and maintain meaningful careers include: role models and mentors (Bell & Spec, 2012); self-expectations of employment (Cmar, 2015; Young, 1995); and compensatory skills like braille (Bell & Silverman, 2018; Ryles, 1996), good travel skills (Cmar, 2015; Cmar, McDonnall & Crudden, 2018), and adaptive computer skills (Zhou, Smith, Parker, & Griffin-Shirley, 2013). Professionals who specialize in the coordination and instruction of essential skills needed for successful employment include vision rehabilitation therapists (VRTs), orientation and mobility specialists, and access technology instructors.

VRTs conduct comprehensive assessments to identify functional limitations, provide instruction in compensatory skills like braille and the use of magnification, facilitate adjustment to vision loss, and instruct in adaptive techniques that promote health and independence (ACVREP, 2019). Orientation and mobility specialists evaluate and instruct consumers in the use of adaptive strategies and tools for travelling, such as planning and accessing transportation services, navigational strategies, training in the use of other senses like hearing, and use of mobility devices such as a long cane, dog guide, or GPS apps (Kaiser, Cmar, Rosen, & Anderson, 2018). Access technology instructors evaluate a consumer's technological needs, help them explore and assess various tools to meet these needs, and provide set-up and training in the use of the recommended tools (ACVREP, 2019).

Although all the members of the vision rehabilitation team offer vital expertise to the consumer's program, the VRT has a unique and comprehensive skillset that may promote skills for employment. The VRT is tasked with instructing individuals in the home, workplace, or community. Those who master adaptive skills at home can transfer those same skills to the job (Bowman, 2007).

To facilitate adaptive skills transfer to the job site, VRTs can draw on the strategy of problem-based learning (ACVREP, 2019). Problem-based learning uses real-world situations to teach skills needed for functioning in that environment. To implement problem-based learning to teach employment readiness, the VRT may have the consumer use their notetaking skills to compile minutes from a meeting or access the internet to locate phone numbers for scheduling relevant appointments.

The following example illustrates how one state VR agency worked with a non-profit agency to develop a program that incorporated vision rehabilitation and job readiness skills. Prior to 2014, the state VR agency contracted with Vision Rehabilitation Services (VRS) to provide vision rehabilitation skills training to their VR consumers, such as the use of screen reading software, adaptive devices, or a long cane. Once the consumer had met their vision rehabilitation goals, they were referred to the state VR agency to work with employment specialists. The employment specialists provided job readiness training, such as job interview preparation, communication skills, workplace etiquette, and placement services.

Vocational rehabilitation counselors, consumers, and VRS staff observed a need for changes based on reports from former consumers indicating that many were never placed in employment, or the work they were offered was not well-suited to their education. Identifying this need, the staff at VRS, along with colleagues from the VR agency and consumers, set out to

design a new approach. Goals for the new program were to: shorten the length of the VR process, actively engage consumers in their VR program, decrease the need for re-training, increase number of successful employment placements, and reduce the cost to the VR program.

Job Readiness Program

In 2014, an interdisciplinary team including VRTs, orientation and mobility specialists, and assistive technology professionals from VRS, met to design a new approach for helping consumers reach successful employment outcomes. Ten skillsets were identified, and each was explored for ways to build those skills through real-world scenarios. The new Job Readiness Program (JRP) wove the employment skills into all areas of the vision rehabilitation process.

The VRTs assessed each participant, organized work activities where individualized instruction would occur, made referrals as needed for orientation and mobility and assistive technology instruction, and ran group activities. Participants attended a weekly class with peers where they completed work personality assessments, practiced explaining their vision, and used their adaptive tools to complete work tasks. The foundation of the JRP was built on participants recognizing their passions and strengths and connecting how these can be parlayed into work.

From the beginning of the JRP, a task analysis strategy was used to break each step into manageable tasks. First, participants developed a list of their interests, hobbies, and passions. Next, with peers and instructors, participants brainstormed types of occupations related to their interests. For example, a participant who had a passion for animals and who felt good when helping others might brainstorm the following types of employment for further investigation: dog walker, pet groomer, pet trainer, veterinarian assistant, pet sitter, doggy daycare worker, veterinarian, zookeeper, and pet store employee.

The VRTs set up problem-based learning activities that placed the participants in real-world situations to provide opportunities to implement their emerging skills. For example, the participants used notetaking tools and adaptive strategies to develop a list of passions and interests. Each list was created as a “working document,” providing opportunities for practice with handwriting, keyboarding information storage and retrieval, and access technology skills. As documents were revised and updated, they were emailed to the instructor. Assignments were submitted regularly, simulating progress reports like those required in the workplace. Participants were encouraged to set weekly goals for exploration activities, where they called and set-up appointments, put meetings on their calendars, and wrote professional thank-you emails and summary reports of their activities. If participants had an employment goal related to art or graphic design, they developed diagrams, vision boards, power points, or videos that artistically illustrated employment paths for investigation.

Using the participants’ lists of potential occupations, the VRTs introduced them to the informational interview process. Completing tasks like notetaking, calling on the telephone and interviewing, using the internet for research, and locating professionals and businesses helped participants practice work skills. Planning transportation to visit various employers during community-based orientation and mobility lessons allowed the participants to practice the use of long cane travel and navigational skills when locating a specific business. Informational interviews allowed the participants to identify tasks required by a specific job. These core job requirements were then compared to the participant’s interests and skillsets. Participants debriefed by writing a summary report from their notes and later presented what they learned to their peer group. Over time, this self-reflection process encouraged participants to recognize what types of tasks they could see themselves doing on a day-to-day basis. Also, JRP

participants were prompted to evaluate the accessibility of the worksite, accommodations needed for that job, and the overall fit of the job.

As participants progressed through the program, they were encouraged to stay open-minded and not rule out any occupation because of transportation or a missing skillset. Instead, participants learned to problem-solve. For instance, a transportation challenge might be addressed through an orientation and mobility goal or a missing skillset could be developed through an online class or volunteer opportunity.

When a position seemed like a good fit, participants were encouraged to request an opportunity to job shadow to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the daily job tasks. During these observations, the participants observed the detailed workings involved in a specific position and gained a better understanding of how their skills may be applied to those work tasks. To understand the path to obtaining that type of employment, participants were coached to interview those they shadowed about their career journey.

As participants gained vision rehabilitation skills, they were directed to begin volunteering or “working” as an intern in a chosen career field. Internships provided participants opportunities to learn how to apply their new skills and assistive technologies in a work environment. Whenever possible, real work simulations were integrated into the participant’s training program. For instance, if an individual wanted to be a paralegal, access technology training would be focused on tasks like writing briefs and using the internet to complete legal research. This allowed participants to learn job-specific skills and see a direct connection between adaptive skills and employment. Most participants reported that this was helpful to them and kept them motivated throughout the training. Some participants saved their work into folders that they shared with potential employers as a portfolio.

As participants neared the end of the JRP, VR counselors provided financial support for one or two community work adjustment training placements (CWATs). These paid work experiences allowed participants to plan their transportation to their CWAT site, problem-solve through workplace challenges, navigate reporting procedures for the Social Security Administration, and transfer their vision rehabilitation skills and tools to the real world. As challenges arose, staff provided support for both the participant and the employer.

To include more rural JRP participants and provide the peer-to-peer benefits, VRS is adding online resources, such as courses, podcasts, social media and virtual communication tools, to the program. By joining a group class using FaceTime, Skype, or conference call, work from home experiences can be simulated.

Results

Since October 2014, the VRS Job Readiness program has engaged 84 participants, with 30 completing the program, and nine withdrawing for various reasons. The remaining 45 participants remain enrolled or are in school. Of the 30 successful completers, 22 were hired, two are self-employed, three are working in supported employment, and three are volunteers. In four years, only nine people did not complete the program, three moved out-of-state, four found they could not work due to significant health concerns, and two were transferred to the VR program for placement. The majority of completers were in the JRP for nine to 18 months. Participants range in age from teens in the preemployment training services program to people in their 60s; though most participants were between the ages of 20-45. Of the 45 consumers currently in the program, 17 are high school or college students. In the past four years, 20% of participants had a dual-sensory loss, and 12% had vision loss combined with a significant physical or cognitive disability.

Participants gave feedback about the JRP. This process provided an opportunity for participants to engage in positive, evaluative conversations like those they may have with their peers and supervisors at work. Participant feedback suggested that beneficial activities included: practice explaining their vision in clear positive terms; accurately describing how tools and accommodations could be applied to job tasks; public speaking exercises, such as impromptu speaking and networking; and opportunities to discuss their anxieties. Staff observed that peer interactions had a positive effect on participants. For example, participants who were able to attend weekly classes appeared to have an increase in self-esteem and developed a peer network.

Challenges

Sometimes, embarking on real-world activities like informational interviews and internships triggered participants' feelings of anxiety, depression, or low confidence. Staff reported that participants were, in these transition points, frequently missing group activities, less responsive to communications from staff, and less likely to complete assignments. Along with access to counseling staff, a registered nurse was invited to address the group about the signs, symptoms, and resources for depression. This presentation provided participants the opportunity to share their fears and many realized they were not alone in their feelings. Additionally, the staff gave group assignments, providing opportunities for participants to share in smaller groups. Shortly after the presentation on depression, several participants found employment or moved into a CWAT placement. Staff believed that this was a critical turning point for the participants.

Several challenges were experienced in the logistical support needed from the VR program. When specialized counselors for the blind left their positions, consumers' cases were put on hold while a new, usually inexperienced counselor, was hired. Additionally, policy changes in the VR program frequently interrupted the service authorization and payment

processes. When this happened mid-program, participants lost momentum or were left without equipment needed for individual success. Overall, the assistive technology needs of the participants were an ongoing challenge. Staff observed that providing assistive technology devices as early as possible gave participants more opportunities to use these devices in real-world situations.

Another challenge was the lack of staff to conduct business development. The JRP staff strove to match the participants' career goals with their informational interview, shadowing, volunteering, internship, and CWAT experiences. The variety of career paths created an ongoing need for business partnerships to support these placements. Currently, this need is met through a labor-intensive process of guiding participants to build their own networks. These networks are developed through personal connections, social networking platforms, and unscheduled visits to businesses during orientation and mobility lessons. Business relationships have also been built by inviting employers to attend the group activities as a speaker. These interactions have helped employers to better understand how individuals who are blind or visually impaired can complete work tasks and the employers have been able to assist participants in refining their interview skills.

Conclusion

The key elements in the JRP were the VRTs who organized most activities, the training experiences provided in real-world settings, peer group activities, and the continuous focus on employment. The VRTs used their specialized knowledge to assess the ongoing needs of participants, instructed participants in compensatory and problem-solving skills, and provided referrals for orientation and mobility and assistive technology instruction. Through problem-based learning opportunities, participants were placed in individualized career focused

employment scenarios that reinforced their skills and increased their confidence for successful employment. Peer group activities provided participants opportunities to practice skills, connect with peers facing similar challenges, address the anxiety of new experiences, and reflect about their JRP journey. Key elements that helped JRP participants stay engaged and focused on employment included, shifting vision rehabilitation instructional activities to work-like experiences and terming the skills obtained as “work skills.”

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