

**Effectiveness of a Business Development Training for Rehabilitation Counselors  
who Work with Consumers who are Blind or Visually Impaired**

Michele C. McDonnall, Ph.D.

[m.mcdonnall@msstate.edu](mailto:m.mcdonnall@msstate.edu)

Zhen Sui, Ph.D.

[csui@colled.msstate.edu](mailto:csui@colled.msstate.edu)

The National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision

Mississippi State University

P.O. Box 6189

Mississippi State, MS 39762

Author Note: The contents of this manuscript were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, NIDILRR grant 90RT5040-01-00. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and Human Services and should not indicate endorsement by the Federal Government.

The published version of this document can be found at  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0034355218796276>.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

### **Abstract**

The passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act has placed increased emphasis on business engagement for vocational rehabilitation agencies, yet many rehabilitation counselors are not prepared to work with businesses. The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the initial effectiveness of a business development training for rehabilitation counselors who work with consumers who are blind or visually impaired. A secondary purpose was to report on the sample's pre-training status on variables associated with business development. Participants were 80 counselors and counselor supervisors employed by four separate agencies who completed the 19 hour in-person training. Data was collected from participants prior to and immediately following the training. Outcome variables were self-perceived knowledge, skills, and comfort level with business development activities, and measured business development knowledge and self-efficacy. Prior to the training, participants recognized the importance of, and a personal need for training in, business development, and perceived moderate levels of comfort, knowledge and skills. Participants demonstrated statistically significant increases on all outcome measures, with effect sizes ranging from medium to large. These results provide support for the effectiveness of the training in improving business development outcomes in the short-term. Additional research is needed to evaluate its long-term effectiveness.

### **Effectiveness of a Business Development Training for Rehabilitation Counselors who Work with Consumers who are Blind or Visually Impaired**

Working with businesses has always been an important element of services that vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies provide to help their consumers obtain employment. Within the past 10 to 15 years, business development activities utilizing the dual customer approach, or business relations model, have received increased attention. The dual customer approach focuses on treating business as a customer of the agency and establishing long-term relationships with businesses, including at a national level (Anderson et al., 2006). Business development may be particularly important for agencies and rehabilitation counselors (henceforth referred to as counselors for brevity) that serve consumers who are blind or visually impaired, as negative employer attitudes are believed to be a major barrier to employment for this population and most employers do not understand how a blind person could perform basic job functions (Coffey, Coufopoulos, & Kinghom, 2014; Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Crudden, Williams, McBroom, & Moore, 2002; Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997; McDonnall, O'Mally, & Crudden, 2014; Salomone & Paige, 1984). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that employers have greater concerns about employing people who are blind or visually impaired compared to those with other disabilities (Chen, Blankenship, Austin, Cantu, & Kotbungkair, 2016; Fuqua, Rathburn, & Gade, 1984; Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans, & Peterson, 2000; Inglis, 2006; Williams, 1972).

The passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2016) brought renewed emphasis on working with and providing services to business for VR agencies. In general, WIOA places increased emphasis on employer engagement to improve competitive integrated employment outcomes for consumers. Specific changes include: (a) requirement that

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

VR agencies collaborate and coordinate with employers, (b) expansion of the types of services VR agencies can provide to employers, and (c) that VR agency personnel have the skills and ability to work effectively not just with people with disabilities, but also with employers (WIOA, 2016). Although WIOA does not specify that counselors have to be responsible for providing services to business, most agencies do expect their counselors to be involved in business engagement (McDonnall, 2017; Haines et al., 2018).

Of the many varying roles and responsibilities of the counselor job, interacting with businesses to help generate employment opportunities for consumers has long been considered an important component (Leahy, Muenzen, Saunders, & Strauser, 2009). It was documented in the past that counselors provided the majority of placement services to consumers (Gilbride, 2000). Despite the fact that a majority of agencies currently employ business relations specialists (i.e., staff whose primary role is to interact with businesses), most counselors are also responsible for business development activities (McDonnall, 2017, Haines et al., 2018). Even though working with businesses is an essential job function, some counselors are uncomfortable about interacting with employers (Author, 2014; Fleming, Phillips, Kaseroff, & Huck, 2014; Schultz, 2008).

Lack of time due to large caseload sizes and other responsibilities is one of the major barriers to engaging with business for counselors (Fleming et al., 2014; McDonnall, 2017). Lack of business development knowledge and skills and lack of experience in interacting with employers also prevent counselors from working with business (Fleming et al., 2014; McDonnall, 2017). Research has documented a lack of counselor preparation and a need for more training in developing employer relationships (Chan et al., 2003; Froehlich & Linkowski, 2002; Lewis & Patterson, 1998). Results of a recent study that evaluated the training needs of

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

rehabilitation counselors indicated that counselors' perceived level of preparation was well below their perceived level of importance for many knowledge areas related to job development/job placement and vocational consultation/services for employers (Beveridge, Leconte, Shaine, Del Toro, & Penrod, 2015).

Material associated with business development is not often included in the curricula of rehabilitation counseling master's programs. Programs typically offer a job placement course, but do not appear to provide training in how to work effectively with businesses. VR agency administrators in one study specifically commented on the lack of preparation of new rehabilitation counselor master's degree graduates (McDonnall, 2017). Given that employers report their interactions with the VR system to be mixed, at best, with concerns expressed about VR's efficiency and efficacy (Fraser, Ajzen, Johnson, Hebert, & Chan, 2011; Gilbride et al., 2000; Henry, Petkauskos, Stanislawzyk, & Vogt, 2014), it is imperative that counselors receive training in how to interact effectively with employers.

Some frequently mentioned things that employers indicate they want from VR agencies are consistent follow-up services (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Crudden et al., 2002; Hernandez et al., 2008; McDonnall & Crudden, 2015; Tilson, 1996); professionals who can provide services beyond placement and serve as experts on disability employment issues (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Simonsen, Fabian, Buchanan, & Luecking, 2011); clear communication and clarity about the scope of the agency's services (Kirchner et al., 1997; Simonsen et al., 2011); and to help them save time in recruiting applicants and be referred only well qualified applicants (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003; Henry et al., 2014). The importance of trust in the relationship (Buys & Rennie, 2001) and a close working relationship (McDonnall & Crudden, 2015) between the VR professional and the employer has also been documented.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Employers' preferences reflect the previously mentioned dual customer approach to business engagement, which is grounded in the concept of mutual benefit (Anderson et al., 2006; Fry, 1997; Luecking, 2008; Tilson, 1996). Under the dual-customer model, the counselor has two customers: consumers, who need a job, and employers, who need high-quality employees (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999). The needs of each customer must be met without neglecting the needs of either. In this model, counselors should be able to articulate why hiring individuals with disabilities makes good business sense (Henry et al., 2014). Employers perceive risks to hiring individuals with disabilities, and they want to work with professionals who are conscious of their needs and provide qualified job applicants who can positively contribute to the companies' overall operation (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Simonsen et al., 2011; Stensrud, 2007).

Graduates are leaving master's programs unprepared to engage with business, and perhaps even unaware that working with businesses is an important part of the VR counselor job. The WIOA significantly changed the personnel standards for VR, as personnel standards do not require counselor certification or licensure, and they specifically indicate that personnel should have specialized training and experience to prepare them to work with employers (WIOA, 2016). Relevant personnel skills identified in the final rules for WIOA include the use of labor market information to support building and maintaining relationships with employers. Previously working with employers was thought to be a part of the VR counselor's job; now this responsibility is clearly articulated in the reauthorized Rehabilitation Act.

Based on the need demonstrated in the literature and the passage of WIOA, we created a business development training designed specifically for VR counselors who work with consumers who are blind or visually impaired. Although the training was designed with VR counselors in mind, it is appropriate for all professionals who work to help these consumers

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

obtain employment. One reason for the focus on this professional group is the evidence that employers are more concerned about hiring people who are blind or visually impaired (Chen et al., 2016; Fuqua et al., 1984; Gilbride et al., 2000; Inglis, 2006; Williams, 1972). The training was based on (a) an existing curriculum used with this professional population by a separate VR agency and (b) results from a research study focused on this professional population, which also included research with employers about their attitudes towards employing people who are blind or visually impaired. Negative employer attitudes are considered one of the biggest barriers to employment for people who are blind or visually impaired (Coffey et al, 2014; Crudden & McBroom, 1999; Kirchner et al., 1997; McDonnall et al., 2014; Salomone & Paige, 1984), and this curriculum addresses that issue with information specific to this consumer population. Although the need for business development training may not be greater for VR counselors who work with people who are blind or visually impaired, the need is assumed to be similar to the need for counselors who work with consumers with all types of disabilities, as documented in the literature.

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the initial effectiveness of this business development training designed specifically for VR counselors who work with consumers who are blind or visually impaired. We wanted to determine whether the training was associated with an immediate change in business development knowledge and self-efficacy, and personal perceptions of business development knowledge, skill and comfort level. Because the training was provided to counselors within agencies, we also evaluated whether there were differences by agency. A secondary purpose of the study was to report on the level of these outcome variables, and other variables associated with business development activities, in VR counselors prior to receiving the training. The following research questions were addressed:

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

1. What are VR counselors' pre-training perceptions about encouragement and support for business development activities within their agencies?
2. What are VR counselors' pre-training perceptions about importance of business development activities and training needs?
3. Does participation in a business development training improve VR counselors' comfort level with, self-perceived skill, and self-perceived knowledge in conducting business development activities?
4. Does participation in a business development training increase VR counselors' knowledge and self-efficacy about working with businesses?
5. Do any changes observed in VR counselors' knowledge, comfort, skills, or self-efficacy differ by agency?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The 80 participants were employed by four VR agencies that provide services to blind and visually impaired people in their states (separate agencies). These agencies were spread across the country, located in four of the five major regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West). Administrators from these four agencies volunteered to participate in a research study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the business development training. In exchange for allowing and encouraging their staff to participate in the research study, they received the in-person training in their state at no cost. Eligibility criteria were being employed by the agency in a counseling position and working directly with consumers (carrying a caseload) or being directly involved in business development activities. Most participants (97.5%,  $n=78$ ) carried consumer caseloads and were either counselors ( $n=74$ ) or counselor supervisors ( $n=6$ ). The

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

specific job titles of the counselors varied, and included VR counselor, transition counselor, college counselor, orientation counselor, deaf-blind counselor, and business relations specialist. Note that the two participants who served as business relations specialists held the official title of VR counselor, and had recently moved from a regular caseload-carrying counselor position to the business relations positions.

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of the professionals who received the business development training. The majority of the participants were female and between the ages of 30 and 49. Slightly more than half had a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. Over a quarter (27.5%,  $n=22$ ) had a disability: 3 had mild vision loss, 14 were legally or totally blind, and 7 had another type of disability. On average, participants had been employed as a VR counselor for 8.4 years ( $SD = 9.4$ ), and worked with people with blindness or visual impairment for approximately the same length of time: 8.6 years ( $SD = 8.4$ ). Caseload size varied considerably, ranging from 5 to 182, with an average of 69.9 ( $SD = 40.8$ ) consumers on a caseload.

### **Procedure**

The authors' university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that this study was not human subjects research and excluded it from IRB review. Agency administrators provided contact information for their staff who were eligible to participate in the study. We contacted these counselors two to four weeks prior to their scheduled training and invited them to participate in the study by completing the online pre-test. We explained the scope of the study and informed them that ongoing participation would be requested. Reminders were sent if a response was not received within a week. Pre-tests were completed between 28 days prior to the training up to the day of the training. Participants then completed the 19 hour in-person training,

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

which was presented by four trainers in a three or four day format, depending on the preference of the agency. Some participants were not present for the entire 19 hours of the training; their number of hours of participation was recorded. Professionals who participated in less than 66% of the training ( $n=4$ ) were not included in the post-test analyses. The day after the training participants received an invitation to complete the immediate post-test. Most participants completed the online post-test within one week of the training; all post-tests were completed within 25 days of the training.

### **Business Development Training Curriculum**

The training curriculum was based on two primary sources: (a) best practice elements of the curriculum that the former Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), Division of Blind Services (now the Texas Workforce Commission Vocational Rehabilitation Services) used to train its staff regarding business development and (b) results from a 5-year research project conducted by the first author that investigated how VR agencies interact with businesses and the outcomes of those interactions. A large body of knowledge exists about how to work with businesses from the business relations model, or dual customer approach perspective (e.g., Anderson et al, 2006; Fry, 1997). This knowledge is based on expert opinion and experience, and can be considered existing best practice on working with businesses. The 5-year research project also provided empirical support for the efficacy of the dual customer approach (Author, 2016). Texas DARS developed a training curriculum constructed on this knowledge which was provided to all of their new staff.

The basic tenets of the training curriculum were based on Texas DARS' existing curriculum. These foundational elements include essential knowledge that counselors need to work with employers; our research project supported the importance of these foundational

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

elements and identified additional information considered helpful to counselors when preparing to interact with businesses. The training includes a discussion of the pre-requisites necessary for a counselor to begin developing business relationships (such as knowing their clients' skills, abilities, and readiness to work; knowing how to conduct a job analysis; having a method to document contacts and maintain notes about interactions). Results from the research project were incorporated into the curriculum, including employer knowledge and attitudes towards hiring people who are blind or visually impaired and identifying practices that work from professionals within agencies successful at business development.

Existing job development training curricula tend to focus on a sales approach, which prompts counselors to “sell” their consumers’ as potential employees to businesses (e.g., DTG-EMP working knowledge, which using the Allen Anderson model). The basis of our training approach is that working with businesses is not about selling, it’s about relationships. The primary goal of the training is to help counselors realize they have the skills they need to engage with business, and increase their comfort level and confidence with this activity. Additional goals of the training are to: (a) help participants identify barriers they are experiencing to engaging with business, (b) provide tools and knowledge to help them engage with business, (c) encourage use of counseling skills to facilitate relationship-building with employers, (d) help them play to their strengths when engaging with business, and (e) encourage them to engage with business.

The curriculum provides a model to follow when conducting business development activities, and includes specific suggestions about how to handle each step of the business development process. See Table 2 for a list of topics covered in the curriculum. In addition to providing new information via lecture and discussion, the training incorporated many hands-on

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

activities to help the participants process and learn the material. A role-play activity served as a culmination incorporating all that was learned in the training. After development of the curriculum, the entire 19 hour training was pilot tested with a group of practicing rehabilitation counselors. Feedback and suggestions from these participants was incorporated into the training prior to implementation with the four agencies.

### **Measures**

Participants completed an online survey that began with demographic and position information questions, which were used to describe the sample. Additional questions included: (a) how the agency handles business development (with a list of three options in terms of who is responsible for this: counselors, other internal staff, and CRPs), (b) percentage of work time devoted to business development, (c) amount of encouragement and support the agency and the direct supervisor provide for business development activities, (d) the importance of business development activities to consumers' success in obtaining employment, and (e) need for training and perceived importance of improving business development skills and knowledge.

**Self-perceived business development knowledge, skill, and comfort.** Single item questions were utilized to assess self-perceived knowledge, skill, and comfort with business development activities. Participants were asked their level of agreement (on a 5-point scale) with two statements: "I have the knowledge needed to conduct business development activities" and "I have the skills needed to conduct business development activities." They were also asked to "Rate your comfort level with conducting business development activities," on a 5-point scale from very uncomfortable to completely comfortable.

**Business Development Knowledge Scale.** A scale to measure knowledge about working with businesses was developed for this study as an existing measure could not be located.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Knowledge components include basic information about business, including business hiring practices, and business development, including employers' expectations from external agencies such as VR. Questions were based on factual information obtained from existing sources (e.g., business textbooks, research articles documenting employer preferences associated with services from VR, principles of the dual customer approach). The scale was developed by the lead author and was reviewed by two business experts and three VR professionals with expertise in business development. Several items were revised or eliminated based on this feedback. The scale was then pilot tested with a convenience sample of 31 practicing counselors and other VR professionals. Items that were either missed or answered correctly by a very large majority of respondents were eliminated, to arrive at a final scale that consisted of 23 multiple choice items (10 items focused on basic business knowledge and 13 items focused on business development knowledge). An example item is: "Which of the following did employers identify as a very important component of their relationship with rehabilitation agency personnel?" Response options were (a) Trust, (b) Friendship, (c) Professional courtesy, and (d) Openness. The measure used for this study was the percentage correct, with a possible range of 0 to 100%.

**Job Development Efficacy Scale.** Self-efficacy for working with businesses was measured with the Job Development Efficacy Scale (JDES; Fabian & Waugh, 2001). The JDES has appropriate internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ) and consists of 20 items that represent three competency areas: managing employer concerns, addressing employment barriers, and marketing services. Example items are: "I am comfortable describing my agency to prospective employers" and "I am confident about discussing my consumer's needs for job accommodations with employers." Response options are a 5-point strongly agree to strongly disagree scale. JDES scores were calculated by combining all 20 items together, resulting in a

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

possible score range of 20 to 100. It was used in subsequent studies that also documented an  $\alpha$  of .81 (Schultz, 2008; Fabian, Simonsen, & Luecking, 2012). For the sample utilized in this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .85.

### **Data Analyses**

Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) were utilized to investigate the first two research questions, and also to provide descriptive information about all variables included in the study. Repeated measures ANOVAs were utilized to investigate research questions 3 through 5 and evaluate the effectiveness of the training. State agency served as the between-subjects factor and time was the repeated within-subject factor. Partial eta-squared ( $\eta_p^2$ ) was utilized as an effect size measure. If analyses revealed a significant time by agency effect, follow-up ANOVAs were conducted with change scores (i.e., post-test minus pre-test) utilizing the Tukey procedure to determine where the differences among agencies occurred. SAS Version 9.4 was used to conduct all statistical analyses.

### **Results**

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and ranges) for survey items at pre-test as well as the five variables used as outcome measures at post-test. Almost three quarters of the participants (72.5%,  $n=58$ ) reported that their agencies provided a moderate amount or great deal of encouragement, while 58.3% ( $n=47$ ) indicated that their agencies provided a moderate amount or great deal of support to conduct business development activities. Slightly more than half indicated that their supervisor provided a moderate amount or a great deal of encouragement (52.5%,  $n=42$ ) and support (51.3%,  $n=41$ ) to conduct business development activities.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

In terms of how the agency handles business development, 82.5% ( $n=66$ ) of the participants reported that counselors were expected to do business development for the agency, 63.8% ( $n=51$ ) reported other internal staff were expected to do business development, and 41.3% ( $n=33$ ) reported contracted CRPs were expected to do business development. More than a third (35%,  $n=28$ ) devoted at least 25% of their time to business development activities.

Most of the participants (78.8%,  $n=63$ ) believed that business development activities were important or very important to consumers' success in obtaining employment. A large majority of the participants (90.0%,  $n=72$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that they would benefit from additional training on conducting business development activities. A smaller majority (71.3%,  $n=57$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that improving their business development knowledge and skills was a priority for them.

Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to compare self-perceived business development knowledge, skill, and comfort level before and after participation in the training. There was a significant time effect on VR counselors' self-perceived knowledge (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.66$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 36.49$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.336$ ), self-perceived skills (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.79$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 18.66$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.206$ ), and comfort level (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.91$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 7.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.091$ ) with conducting business activities. These results indicate that, after receiving training, VR professionals on average significantly increased self-perceived knowledge from 3.4 to 4.1, skill from 3.4 to 4.0, and comfort level from 3.2 to 3.6 in terms of business development activities. A significant interaction between time and state agency was found only on self-perceived knowledge (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.88$ ,  $F(3, 72) = 3.33$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.122$ ). Counselors from Agency 1 experienced a self-perceived increase in knowledge of 1.4 points on the 5-point scale, which was a significantly larger increase in knowledge compared to Agency 2 (0.50 increase)

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

and 4 (0.52 increase). Agency 3's increase of 0.83 points was not significantly different than Agency 1's increase.

Repeated measures ANOVAs were also used to compare VR counselors' measured knowledge and self-efficacy before and after participation in the training. There was a significant time effect on the Business Development Knowledge Scale (BDKS; Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.54$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 61.79$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.462$ ), and the Job Development Efficacy Scale (Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.93$ ,  $F(1, 72) = 5.69$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.073$ ). These results indicated that, on average, VR professionals significantly increased their business development knowledge from 46.7% to 55.8% and their self-efficacy from 67.6 to 70.5. Only on the BDKS was there a significant interaction between time and state agency (Wilks'  $\lambda = .81$ ,  $F(3, 72) = 5.50$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.186$ ). On average, BDKS scores significantly increased within each agency, but Agency 3 had the largest increase in BDKS scores (26.1% - from 43.5% to 69.6%), which represented a significantly larger increase than the other three agencies.

### Discussion

A majority of participants in our study perceived that their agencies and direct supervisors provided a moderate or a great deal of encouragement and support for conducting business development activities. However, they perceived a greater amount of both encouragement and support for business development activities from their agencies than from their direct supervisors. In addition, they perceived a greater amount of encouragement than actual support from their agencies. In other words, some felt that their agencies were encouraging them to conduct business development activities but were not providing as great a level of support as encouragement. If agencies are committed to increasing their business development efforts, they must be certain that they are providing the support necessary to enable

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

the counselors to conduct business development activities and that supervisors are also providing the necessary encouragement and support. Research has indicated that supervisors play an important role in mentoring counselors on business development, including modeling these behaviors (Author, 2014).

A majority of participants in our study recognized that they were expected to do business development (a fact confirmed with all agency administrators), although most indicated another entity was also responsible for business development activities of the agency. Participants overwhelmingly felt that business development activities are important to their consumers' success in obtaining employment. A large majority of participants also acknowledged their need for additional training on business development activities, and a smaller majority indicated that improving their knowledge and skills in this area was a priority for them. All of these results indicate that counselors recognize the value and importance of business development, including their role in this activity. The average time our sample reported spending on business development activities prior to training was approximately 20%, which is equivalent to the average time spent by a larger, nationally representative sample of counselor in 2012 (McDonnall, 2017).

Although most professionals in our sample recognized the importance of business development activities prior to the training, most were uncomfortable or only somewhat comfortable with these activities. After the training, only three participants (3.8%) were uncomfortable with conducting business development activities. Perhaps surprisingly, given their comfort level, a slight majority agreed they had the knowledge and skills needed to conduct business development activities prior to the training. These self-perceived areas also increased

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

significantly after the training, with more than 85% indicating that they had the knowledge and the skills necessary to conduct business development activities.

Significant increases were also documented for the formal measures utilized in the study. Participation in the training was associated with a significant increase in measured business development knowledge and in self-efficacy for job development. Based on effect size measures, average increases in business knowledge were large, while increases in self-efficacy were medium in size. Individual increases varied widely on both measures: knowledge score changes ranged from -26% to +39% and self-efficacy score changes ranged from -12 to +20. Participating in the training is not likely to be associated with an actual decrease in business development knowledge; it is thought that people with large decreases were likely guessing on the answers at post-test, pre-test, or both. Decreases in self-efficacy may represent actual decreases in business development confidence after receiving the training and recognizing a lack of knowledge, or could also possibly be associated with random selection of answers. In general, those who scored lower on either measure at pre-test were more likely to exhibit substantial increases in scores, as they had more opportunity for growth.

Changes in knowledge (both measured and self-perceived) differed by agency, while all other measures increased at a similar rate across agencies. Participants from one agency exhibited significantly greater increases in knowledge than participants from the other three agencies. It is not clear why the increase in knowledge was significantly larger in one agency, but it was the smallest agency, with only six participating counselors, that had the largest increase. All participants from that agency exhibited substantial increases in knowledge, while in other agencies the change varied from a decrease to a large increase. One factor that may explain the difference is engagement with the training. Trainers noted that participants from the small

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

agency were very attentive to the training, while attentiveness, or ability to gauge attentiveness, varied with the larger groups.

### **Limitations**

A number of limitations associated with this study should be acknowledged. A primary limitation is that the study utilizes a pre-experimental design: although the study evaluates change across participants before and after receiving an intervention, there is no control group with which to compare the results. Increases documented in comfort level, skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy are assumed to be associated with participation in the training, but without a control group we cannot be certain the training caused the changes. We also do not know whether the changes exhibited will translate to actual improvements in business engagement for the counselors. Another limitation is that the current study only tested for immediate effects of the training. While immediate effects are valuable, a more important measure will be the ability of the training to result in changes over a more extended period of time. Fortunately, data collection is ongoing for this study, and in the future we will be able to evaluate results with a comparison group and evaluate the effects of the training over time. Finally, the study only includes counselors from four separate agencies and all participants serve consumers with blindness or visual impairment. The findings may not generalize to counselors from other types of agencies or to counselors serving consumers with other disabilities.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

With the passage of the WIOA legislation, there is an expectation that counselors will be more involved in business development activities than in the past. Previous research has documented the lack of comfort some counselors have with job development and working with employers (Fleming et al., 2014; Schultz, 2008), and that was confirmed with counselors in the

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

present study. Agencies should evaluate how much support they are providing to counselors for business development activities, and ensure that their level of support is adequate for their expectations related to business engagement. Supervisors should be urged to increase their encouragement of and support for business development activities among counselors.

Supervisors can play an important role in supporting business development activities by modeling the behavior themselves and mentoring new staff in this area. Consideration should also be given to a realistic plan for increasing business development activities within an agency, with specific expectations clearly identified for, and conveyed to, counselors.

This study and previous research indicates a need for training that will prepare counselors to engage in business development activities. It is likely that many counselors will not be able to effectively engage with business without some specific training or instruction. Ideally, this training would begin during a rehabilitation counseling master's degree program. Although programs are preparing graduates to work effectively with people with disabilities, they are generally not currently preparing them to work effectively with businesses. Master's degree programs should increase their focus on business development activities, given the need identified in this and previous studies, and the personnel standards in WIOA.

There is a need for practicing VR counselors to improve their knowledge and skills in business development. This study provides the results from an initial evaluation of the effectiveness of a training designed to prepare professionals to engage with business. The initial results suggest the training is effective in increasing comfort level with, knowledge about, skills, and self-efficacy for business development. Future research is needed to determine the long-term effectiveness of the training, as well as the ability of the training to actually change counselor behavior in terms of their participation in business development activities. Although the training

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

was developed with counselors in mind, it is appropriate for any professional who works with employers to help individuals who are blind or visually impaired obtain employment. It would be a valuable training for business relations specialists within VR agencies, including those who work with consumers with all disabilities, and community rehabilitation providers who support VR agencies in placing these consumers.

**References**

- Anderson, P., Bradshaw, H., Colvin, C., Dickerson, D., Evans, J., Johnson, G., ... Wood, J. (2006). *The VR-Business Network: Charting your course*. Thirty-second Institute on Rehabilitation Issues. Hot Springs, AR: University of Arkansas CURRENTS.
- Beveridge, S., Leconte, P., Shaine, M.D., Del Toro, C., & Penrod, J.C. (2015). Application of the Knowledge Validation Inventory-Revised to assess current training needs of state-federal rehabilitation counselors. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*, 29(3), 241-260.
- Buys, N. J., & Rennie, J. (2001). Developing relationships between Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and employers. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 44(2), 95-103.
- Chan, F., Leahy, M.J., Saunders, J.L., Tarvydas, V.M., Ferrin, J.M., & Lee, G. (2003). Training needs of Certified Rehabilitation Counselors for contemporary practice. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 46(2), 82-91.
- Chen, R. K., Blankenship, C. J., Austin, B. S., Cantu, V.C., & Kotbungkair, W. (2016). Hiring of people with disabilities: Perceptions of Hispanic small business owners. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 45(2), 185-196.
- Coffey, M., Coufopoulos, A., & Kinghom, K. (2014). Barriers to employment for visually impaired women. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 7(3), 171-185.
- Crudden, A., & McBroom, L.W. (1999). Barriers to employment: A survey of employed persons who are visually impaired. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 93(6), 341-350.
- Crudden, A., Williams, W., McBroom, L. W., & Moore, J. E. (2002). *Consumer and employer strategies for overcoming employment barriers*. Mississippi State, MS: Rehabilitation

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

Fabian, E.S., Simonsen, M., & Luecking, R.G. (2012). *Job developer types, placement practices and outcomes*. Retrieved from John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development website: <http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/products/job-developer-types-placement-practices-and-outcomes>

Fabian, E.S., & Waugh, C. (2001). A job development efficacy scale for rehabilitation professionals. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 67(2), 42-47.

Fleming, A.R., Phillips, B.N., Kaseroff, A., & Huck, G.E. (2014). A qualitative study of job placement provider decisions in Vocational Rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 58(1), 7-19. doi: 10.1177/0034355213519681

Froehlich, R.J., & Linkowski, D.C. (2002). An assessment of the training needs of state vocational rehabilitation counselors. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 46(1), 42-50.

Fraser, R., Ajzen, I., Johnson, K., Hebert, J., & Chan, F. (2011). Understanding employers' hiring intention in relation to qualified workers with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 35, 1-11. doi: 10.3233/JVR-2011-0548

Fry, R. (Ed.). 1997. *Developing effective partnerships with employers as a service delivery Mechanism: 23<sup>rd</sup> Institute on Rehabilitation Issues*. Menomonie: University of Wisconsin-Stout, Research and Training Center, Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute.

Fuqua, D. R., Rathbun, M., & Gade, E., M. (1984). A comparison of employer attitudes toward the worker problems of eight types of disabled workers. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 15, 40-43.

Gilbride, D. (2000). Going to work: Placement trends in public rehabilitation. *Journal of*

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

*Vocational Rehabilitation, 14(2), 89-94.*

Gilbride, D., & Stensrud, R. (1999). Demand-side job development and system change.

*Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 42(4), 329-342.*

Gilbride, D., Stensrud, R., Ehlers, C., Evans, E., & Peterson, C. (2000). Employers' attitudes toward hiring persons with disabilities and vocational rehabilitation services. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 66(4), 17-23.*

Gilbride, D., Stensrud, R., Vandergoot, D., & Golden, K. (2003). Identification of the characteristics of work environments and employers open to hiring and accommodating people with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 46(3), 130-137.*

Haines, K., Soldner, J., Zhang, L., St. Laurent, M.L., Knabe, B., West-Evans, K., Mock, L., & Foley, S. (2018). Vocational rehabilitation and business relations: Preliminary indicators of state VR agency capacity. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 48, 133-145.*

Henry, A.D., Petkauskos, K., Stanislawzyk, J., & Vogt, J. (2014). Employer-recommended strategies to increase opportunities for people with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 41, 237-248.* doi: 10.3233/JVR-140716

Hernandez, B., McDonald, K., Divilbiss, M., Horin, E., Velcoff, J., & Donoso, O. (2008). Reflections from employers on the disabled workforce: Focus groups with healthcare, hospitality and retail administrators. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 20(3), 157-164.*

Inglis, C. (2006). *Blind people can do anything but not in my company: Employer attitudes towards employing blind and vision impaired people* (Unpublished master's thesis). Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Kirchner, C., Johnson, G., & Harkins, D. (1997). Research to improve vocational rehabilitation:

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

- Employment barriers and strategies for clients who are blind or visually impaired. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 91, 377-392.
- Leahy, M.J., Muenzen, P., Saunders, J.L., & Strauser, D. (2009). Essential knowledge domains underlying effective rehabilitation counseling practice. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 52(2), 95-106. doi: 10.1177/0034355208323646
- Lewis, S., & Patterson, J.B. (1998). Training needs of rehabilitation counselors and rehabilitation teachers in state vocational rehabilitation agencies serving individuals with visual disabilities. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 64(1), 46-50.
- Luecking, R.G. (2008). Emerging employer views of people with disabilities and the future of job development. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 29, 3-13.
- McDonnall, M.C., & Crudden, A. (2015). Building relationships with businesses: Recommendations from employers concerning persons who are blind or visually impaired. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(3), 43-50.
- McDonnall, M.C., O'Mally, J., & Crudden, A. (2014). Employer knowledge of and attitudes toward individuals who are blind or visually impaired as employees. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 108(3), 213-225.
- McDonnall, M. C. (2017). Working with business: Counselor expectations, actions, and challenges. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy and Education*, 31(2), 135-145.
- Salomone, P. R., & Paige, R. E. (1984). Employment problems and solutions: Perceptions of blind and visually impaired adults. *Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, 33, 147-156.
- Schultz, J.C. (2008). An examination of factors contributing to public rehabilitation counselors' involvement in job placement and development activities. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 74(4), 9-17.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Simonsen, M., Fabian, E.S., Buchanan, L.V., & Luecking, R.G. (2011). *Strategies used by*

*employment service providers in the job development process: Are they consistent with*

*what employers want?* (Technical Report). Rockville, MD: TransCen, Inc.

Stensrud, R. (2007). Developing relationships with employers means considering the competitive

business environment and the risks it produces. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin,*

*50(4), 226-237.*

Tilson, Jr., G. (1996). Building relationships with employers by applying solid customer service

principles. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 6, 77-82.*

Williams, C. A. (1972). Is hiring the handicapped good business? *Journal of Rehabilitation, 38,*

*30-34.*

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, 81 Fed. Reg. 55630 (August 19, 2016) (to

be codified at 34 C.F.R. pts. 361, 363, 397).

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Table 1

*Demographics of Business Development Training Participants*

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Agency</b>		
Agency 1	15	18.8
Agency 2	30	37.5
Agency 3	6	7.5
Agency 4	29	36.3
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	61	76.3
Male	19	23.7
<b>Age</b>		
20 to 29	14	17.5
30 to 39	20	25.0
40 to 49	21	26.3
50 to 59	16	20.0
60 or older	9	11.3
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	41	51.3
Black	21	26.3
Asian	3	3.8
Other	4	5.0
Hispanic	11	13.8
<b>Master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling</b>		
Yes	43	53.8
No	37	46.2

*Note.* *n* = 80.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Table 2

### *Training Curriculum Topics*

- 
1. How you interact with businesses does matter
  2. Your barriers to working with employers
  3. It's the dual customer approach, but whose needs come first?
  4. It's not about selling, it's about relationships
  5. Counseling 101 – Using your counseling skills with employers
  6. Understanding consumers' employment readiness
  7. Business 101 – Thinking like an employer
  8. Business 101 – You be the employer (activity)
  9. Employer attitudes
  10. Knowledge necessary to make business contacts
  11. Labor market information - where to get it and how to use it
  12. Your 30-second elevator speech
  13. Making a connection with a business
  14. Networking
  15. Walking the walk & Talking the talk
  16. Tips for the first meeting with an employer
  17. You have something to offer employers
  18. Disability awareness presentation
  19. Talking to employers about AT & how your consumers can get the job done
  20. Addressing employer concerns about hiring someone who is B/VI
  21. Role play activity
  22. Following-up with employers (including after placement)
  23. Making time for business contacts
  24. What works/what doesn't work – from experienced VR professionals
  25. Challenges specific to business development for consumers with B/LV
  26. What employers really think about VR
-

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR COUNSELORS

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items and Outcome Measures at Pre-test and Post-test*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
<b>Pre-training<sup>a</sup></b>				
1. What percentage of your work time is devoted to business development activities?	19.6	19.2	0	100
2. How much encouragement does your agency provide for you to conduct business development activities?	3.0	0.9	1	4
3. How much support does your agency provide for you to conduct business development activities?	2.7	1.0	1	4
4. How much encouragement does your direct supervisor provide for you to conduct business development activities?	2.7	1.1	1	4
5. How much support does your direct supervisor provide for you to conduct business development activities?	2.6	1.0	1	4
6. Rate the importance of your business development activities to your consumers' success in obtaining employment.	4.2	1.0	1	5
7. I would benefit from additional training on conducting business development activities.	4.3	0.8	1	5
8. Improving my business development knowledge and skills is a priority for me.	3.9	0.9	1	5
9. I have the knowledge needed to conduct business development activities.	3.3	1.1	1	5
10. I have the skills needed to conduct business development activities.	3.4	1.0	1	5
11. Rate your comfort level with conducting business development activities.	3.1	1.1	1	5
12. Business Development Knowledge Scale (%)	47.2	11.8	17.4	69.6
13. Job Development Efficacy Scale	67.3	10.5	44.0	94.0
<b>Post-training<sup>b</sup></b>				
9. I have the knowledge needed to conduct business development activities.	4.1	0.6	2	5
10. I have the skills needed to conduct business development activities.	4.0	0.7	2	5
11. Rate your comfort level with conducting business development activities.	3.6	0.8	1	5
12. Business Development Knowledge Scale (%)	55.8	14.6	26.1	82.6
13. Job Development Efficacy Scale	70.4	7.8	54.0	96.0

*Note.* Items 1 through 4 were measured on a 4-point scale; items 5-11 were measured on a 5-point scale.

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 80.

<sup>b</sup>*n* = 76.