

## Working with Businesses: Counselor Expectations, Actions, and Challenges

### What Were We Trying to Learn?

The demand for VR agencies to work more closely with businesses has been increasing for years, and the recent passing of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 requires that services provided to businesses expand even more. This project explored what is happening within agencies regarding interactions with businesses. Agency administrators and counselors who work with consumers who are BVI participated in surveys and interviews to help us learn about:

- VR agency expectations for VR counselor engagement with businesses
- VR counselor activities related to interacting with businesses
- VR counselor challenges experienced when working with businesses

The results of this study give us a personal perspective of the issues facing VR agencies and counselors and the impact those issues have on building business relationships.

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

Almost all agencies (91.5%) reported that VR counselors interact with businesses as part of their jobs. Networking and building relationships with businesses are important to a VR counselor's job, but the guidelines for these business contacts are not the same across agencies.

Even though the majority of agencies (79.1%) report that business contacts should be ongoing and should not depend on having a consumer ready for employment, most agencies do not require a minimum number of contacts:

- Only 34.9% of agencies require a specific number of monthly business contacts, with an average of 4.4 business contacts required per counselor.
- Only 23.8% of agencies require participation in a specific number of community outreach events, such as job fairs and civic club meetings, with an average of 2.8 events required per counselor.

VR agency expectations for counselors vary, and VR counselor activities also vary across agencies. Counselors in this study spend on average 21% of their time working with businesses, with the majority of counselors spending 5% to 20%. The counselors indicated that they do participate in community outreach events, but only 32.5% participate on a regular basis (monthly or more frequently). Regarding services provided:

- A majority of counselors (68.1%) provide one or more services to businesses on a regular basis.
- The most commonly provided services were: education about blindness/visual impairment, referral of qualified applicants, and identifying and implementing accommodations.

### Research Takeaway

An important part of a vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor's job is to work with businesses to provide employment assistance to individuals who are blind or visually impaired (BVI). Employment outcomes are improved when VR counselors establish long-term relationships and treat businesses as customers, and expectations for VR agency and business interactions continue to grow. Many VR counselors, however, are unprepared to effectively work with businesses and need additional training.

VR counselors are expected to interact with businesses, but they face three major challenges: lack of comfort, lack of preparation/knowledge, and lack of time. Previous research has noted these challenges, but this study looked at how lack of preparation impacts business relationships. A majority of administrators (83.3%) indicated that their newly hired counselors are typically not prepared to work with businesses. Many agree that rehabilitation counseling degree programs are not preparing graduates well enough for this important role of a VR counselor.

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

- VR counselors should have regular contact with businesses. The more contact counselors have with employers, the more comfortable they will be become with this activity. The best way to build an ongoing relationship with a business is through regular contact. These relationships are important for improving consumer employment outcomes.
- Training is needed to ensure that VR counselors are prepared to effectively connect with businesses. Updates are needed to graduate programs to better prepare future counselors to interact with businesses. For now, agencies need to make sure that their counselors are prepared to handle the required business relations tasks. Counselors need training on how and when to communicate with businesses, the importance of attending community events, and guidelines for tracking their outreach activities.

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

Surveys were conducted in 2011 with 47 VR agency administrators and in 2012 with 121 counselors. Interviews were conducted in 2013 with six administrators and 19 counselors.

### **Learn More**

Findings were taken from the following article:

McDonnall, M. (2017). Working with business: Counselor expectations, actions, and challenges.

*Rehabilitation Research, Policy and Education*, 31(2), 135-145. DOI: 10.1891/2168-6653.31.2.135.

For more information about the VR Agency-Employer project, including links to online short courses and a practice guide, see the project overview page: [Effectiveness of VR Agency-Employer Interaction Practices](#).

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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.