

## Exploring the Most Effective Strategies for Working with Employers to Improve Consumers' Employment Outcomes

### What Were We Trying to Learn?

Employment rates for individuals who are BVI are currently, and have been historically, much lower than the employment rate for the general population. Therefore, it is essential to understand what people who work with the BVI population can do to more effectively help them find jobs.

A big part a VR counselor's job is to work with employers, and there is an increased focus on emphasizing employer engagement within the VR system. **We wanted to know if the way counselors interact with employers makes a difference in employment rates for VR consumers who are BVI.** This study focused on the Business Relations Model (BRM), which posits that counselors should treat employers as customers and consider their unique needs. Although the BRM approach is anecdotally considered to be effective, there is very little research to back up this claim.

We were also interested in the way BR staff work with employers. Some VR agencies employ BR staff to serve as the primary liaisons with local employers. However, many BR staff don't have specific training in BVI, so we wanted to see how effective they were at helping individuals who are BVI secure employment. We looked to see if employment rates for consumers who are BVI were affected by BR staff use of three blindness-specific techniques:

- Providing education about how individuals who are BVI function on the job
- Exposing businesses to people who are BVI
- Providing referrals to other businesses that employ someone who is BVI

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

- The approach VR counselors use when working with employers does indeed influence employment rates for consumers who are BVI. Consumers had better employment outcomes when their VR counselors used the BRM approach when working with employers.
- Consumers who are BVI also had better employment outcomes when BR staff used blindness-specific techniques, such as talking about how workers who are BVI complete workplace tasks.
- Agencies that reported creating BRM-inspired policies did not necessarily have better employment outcomes for their consumers. This indicates that the way individual VR counselors and BR staff interact with employers is more important than overall agency policy.

### How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- Many VR counselors report feeling uncomfortable and unsure of themselves when interacting with employers. However, this is one of the most important aspects of their job. Using the BRM approach and treating employers like customers can create positive outcomes for consumers. **Counselors may wish to receive training in using BRM from BR staff or from more experienced counselors.**

### Research Takeaway

The way Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors and business relations (BR) staff interact with employers matters. Employment outcomes for individuals who are blind or visually impaired (BVI) are improved when VR counselors treat employers like customers and when BR staff use blindness-specific techniques when working with employers.

- BR staff might be experts in BRM, but they may not know much about blindness and low vision. Blindness is a unique disability that requires alternative techniques and technology to accommodate it. In order to help them be more effective at creating successful placements for consumers who are BVI, **BR staff need training in issues related to blindness**, such as blindness-specific technology and the ways employees who are BVI complete workplace tasks. BR staff can then pass this information along to employers, thus improving employment outcomes for BVI individuals.
- This study demonstrated the effectiveness of the BRM approach, and VR agency administrators should strongly consider emphasizing this technique. However, administrators should keep in mind that real change has to happen with individual counselors. **Simply setting agency policy or creating new guidelines won't be enough** to boost employment outcomes for consumers who are BVI. Individual counselors need to buy into the changes and modify their approaches to employers.
- In VR agencies that serve consumers with a broad range of disabilities, it may be worthwhile to **track employment outcomes for BVI consumers separately**. This would allow agencies to determine which counselors and BR staff are most effective at working with this unique population.
- Staff interactions with employers proved to be far more important for employment outcomes than agency policy or practice. This drives home the point that **regular, positive contact with employers is the best way to improve employment outcomes for consumers who are BVI**. VR counselors in particular should be encouraged to consider interacting with employers to be an essential part of their job, and VR agency administrators should ensure that counselors have the resources, training, and time they need to make this happen.

## How Was This Project Carried Out?

We surveyed over 200 VR counselors and BR staff across the country about their approaches to interacting with employers. The surveys focused on the BRM approach and blindness-specific approaches. We then linked this data with outcome data (RSA-911 case service) for consumers who are BVI in the VR system in order to determine how approaches to working with employers impacted employment outcomes.

## Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

McDonnall, M.C. (2016). The relationship between vocational rehabilitation professionals' interactions with businesses and employment outcomes for consumers who are blind or visually impaired. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 59(4), 203-212. DOI: 10.1177/0034355215586389

## Contact Us

Email: [nrtc@colled.msstate.edu](mailto:nrtc@colled.msstate.edu)

Webpage: [blind.msstate.edu](http://blind.msstate.edu) or [ntac.blind.msstate.edu](http://ntac.blind.msstate.edu)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/msu.nrtc/](http://www.facebook.com/msu.nrtc/)

Twitter: @MSU\_NRTC



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