

How Do VR Services Received by Consumers who are SSDI Recipients Impact Their Employment Outcomes?

What Were We Trying to Learn?

One-third of the individuals with BVI who enter the VR system are SSDI recipients. SSDI payments are provided to individuals with disabilities who are unable to work; in order to qualify, an individual must have substantial work experience. Traditionally, SSDI recipients have been viewed as less likely to become employed, due to the assumption that individuals who are receiving government benefits will be reluctant to give those up by taking a job.

This study sought to better understand the employment outcomes of individuals who are (a) BVI, (b) in the VR system, and (c) SSDI recipients by exploring whether the services received from VR are linked to whether an individual is more or less likely to find employment. Both the SSDI and VR programs face budgetary constraints, and these findings can be valuable for VR agencies helping individuals leave the benefit rolls to re-enter the workforce.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

Our analysis showed that VR services tend to be provided in four clusters or groupings:

- **Special and remedial services:** Receiving services in this cluster was associated with lower odds of employment. Receiving more services in this category indicates that an individual may be facing a substantial barrier to employment which requires intensive efforts to overcome. Services in this cluster include reader, personal attendant, and interpreter services; basic academic remedial or literacy training ("remedial services"); and college or university training.
- **Job-related services:** Receiving more services in this cluster was associated with higher odds of employment, especially in states with high unemployment rates. These services are generally given to those who have demonstrated that they are "job-ready." As a result, it is not surprising that receipt of these services strongly predicts employment success. Services in this cluster include job placement assistance, job search assistance, on-the-job supports, job readiness training, and on-the-job training.
- **Evaluation:** Receiving more services in this cluster was not associated with employment, one way or another. Services in this cluster include information and referral services, VR counseling and guidance, technical assistance services, and assessment.
- **Training and supports:** Receiving more services in this cluster was associated with greater odds of employment. This category of services may be used to provide job-seekers with the technology and extra assistance they need to secure a job, thus linking it to positive employment outcomes. Services in this cluster include rehabilitation technology, other services, transportation services, maintenance, occupational/vocational training, miscellaneous training, and disability-related augmentative skills training.

Research Takeaway

The vocational rehabilitation (VR) services received by Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) recipients with blindness or visual impairments (BVI) can have a significant impact on the likelihood that these individuals will secure competitive employment. Receipt of some VR services increases the odds of finding employment, while others are associated with decreased odds. The services needed and received by an individual may serve as a signal to their VR counselors about where they are in the process of becoming job-ready and the level of effort that may be required to help that consumer successfully re-enter the workforce.

Our analysis also showed that some specific VR services within the four clusters are positively related to employment outcomes for SSDI recipients who are BVI. The following VR services were shown to indicate improved odds of securing competitive employment:

- **Job placement**, such as a referral for a job interview
- **Job search assistance**, such as identifying jobs or resume preparation
- **On-the-job supports**, which are usually services to help an individual already on the job
- **On-the-job training**, such as paid training in specific job skills
- **Counseling and guidance**
- **Rehabilitation technology**, such as assistive technology that can be used on the job
- **Other services**, which could include a wide range of supports or medical care not included in other categories
- **Maintenance**, such as monetary support for items related to job-seeking (e.g., clothing, relocation costs).

In the same way, other individual services within the clusters were shown to indicate decreased odds an individual will find competitive employment:

- **Reader services**, such as reading aloud or transcription into braille
- **Interpreter services**, which are usually received by individuals who are deaf-blind
- **Job readiness training**, including basic training on appropriate work behavior, timeliness, and dress and grooming
- **Augmentative skills training**, including orientation and mobility, braille, and use of low vision aids
- **Assessment**, which includes determination of eligibility for VR services and/or determining details of which services are needed.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

The services that were shown to decrease the odds of employment for SSDI recipients who are BVI can serve as “red flags” for VR service providers. If a consumer requires one or more of these services, it may be an indication that they will need extra time and effort to find employment. However, although receipt of these services may signal a consumer who is “at risk,” they can still achieve success. For example, an analysis of consumers who received job-readiness training found that consumers who were younger or had more work experience were still able to achieve employment at normal rates.

Our analysis found that job-related services are especially meaningful when unemployment (and thus competition for jobs) is high. Service providers in states with tight economies may want to consider boosting provision of job-related services to provide their clients with the extra edge they need to compete successfully in the workforce.

The results of this study also reinforce that idea that, rather than SSDI recipients being unpromising job candidates, they can experience great success on the job market. In our study, SSDI recipients with BVI had an employment rate of 45%, compared to a 52% employment rate for non-SSDI recipients. This demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief, SSDI recipients are able to achieve employment success at rates close to those of their non-recipient peers. Service providers serving clients who are SSDI-recipients should maintain high expectations for their employment success. 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 studied 3,610 SSDI recipients with BVI who were closed by a VR agency in FY 2011. Our data came from case service records in the RSA-911 data set. Various analysis techniques were used to determine patterns in service delivery and which services predict employment.

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

Giesen, J. M., & Hierholzer, A. (2016). Vocational rehabilitation services and employment for SSDI beneficiaries with visual impairments. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 44(2), 175-189.

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