

VR Agency – Employer Interaction Practices

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Key Points

1. Agency policy regarding business interactions was not associated with employment outcomes for consumers.
2. How VR agency staff interact with businesses individually was associated with employment outcomes for consumers.
3. Positive employer attitudes were associated with two factors that VR agency staff can directly influence.
4. Training to help counselors reframe the way they view employer interactions may be beneficial.

Research Summary

Negative employer attitudes are considered one of the most significant barriers to employment for people who are blind or visually impaired. The interactions VR agency personnel have with employers are considered an important way to potentially address this barrier. Every time an interaction occurs, this represents an opportunity to change employers' negative attitudes. This study involved four major research activities: (a) collecting information from VR agencies about what they are doing in terms of interacting with businesses, (b) evaluating the association between VR agency practices and consumer employment outcomes, (c) evaluating the association between VR agency practices and employer attitudes and knowledge, and (d) conducting interviews with VR agencies that are successful at interacting with businesses.

The first step in the research process was to determine what VR agencies are doing in terms of interacting with employers; this was accomplished by surveys with VR agencies. Administrators and staff (counselors and business relations [BR] staff) from separate and combined agencies were invited to participate. The surveys included scales to measure use of the Business Relations Model (BRM), or dual customer approach, at the agency level and the individual (staff) level.

Clicker Question: Do you believe that your agency's efforts in terms of interacting with businesses have a positive effect on your consumers' employment outcomes?

Large effect (35%)

Moderate effect (52%)

Small effect (9%)

No effect (0%)

Don't know (3%)

To determine whether VR agency-employer interactions are related to consumer employment outcomes, participant responses from the VR surveys were combined with RSA-911 data. Two

years of data was analyzed separately, based on the time frame of the study (fiscal years 2010 and 2011), and analyses were conducted separately with administrator responses and staff responses. The outcome was competitive employment (dichotomous) and the primary predictor variables were measures of use of the BRM and use of blindness-specific techniques with businesses (three activities, based on prior NRTC research). Several control variables were included, to account for factors known to be related to employment outcomes of consumers (state-level labor force data and consumer characteristics).

Results indicated that administrator variables were not consistently related to consumer employment, but some staff variables were consistently related to consumer employment. Results differed for staff, based on their position. Consumers in agencies with counselors who use more BRM practices are more likely to be closed in competitive employment. Consumers in agencies with BR staff who use more blindness-specific techniques with businesses are more likely to be closed in competitive employment.

The next major data collection activity was to measure employer attitudes towards blind and visually impaired people as employees and their knowledge about how they would perform typical job tasks. We conducted interviews with 160 randomly identified employers in the four states, plus completed interviews with 37 VR employer contacts. Employers in our sample had a wide range of attitudes, with an actual score range of 6 to 65 (possible range of 0 to 66), with a mean of 34.68 (SD=14.16). Employers were asked if they knew how blind employees could perform 5 job tasks. They were not very knowledgeable: more than two-thirds of the employers (67%) could not correctly identify ways to accomplish any of the tasks and only 23.4% could identify a way to accomplish one of the five tasks. The data was used to develop a multiple regression model predicting employer attitudes.

Clicker Question: Which of the following factors was most related to employer attitudes?

Having a personal relationship with someone B/VI (39%)

Having hired someone B/VI in the past (35%)

Communication with VR agency (12%)

Knowledge about how B/VI perform job tasks (12%)

The last three options in the clicker question were significantly related to employer attitudes, all at a similar level. Factors not associated with employer attitudes were having a personal relationship with someone who is B/VI, having worked with someone B/VI, and being in a Human Resources position. The three significant factors tended to occur together (were correlated), but each significant factor was important by itself, above and beyond the others. An important message for VR personnel is that those interactions they have with employers are associated with better employer attitudes.

The final major research activity was conducting 55 interviews with administrators, counselors, BR staff, and business partners of four agencies who are successful at business relations. Key

findings in the areas of Barriers, Facilitators, and Strategies for interacting with employers were presented.

Clicker Question: What was the most commonly mentioned barrier to interacting with businesses reported by counselors?

Don't know how to do this (14%)

Don't feel comfortable doing this (39%)

Don't have the time to do this (45%)

Lack of time was the most commonly mentioned barrier by counselors, although this was mentioned more by counselors from some agencies than others. Lack of comfort or confidence was also commonly mentioned as a barrier. Administrators from 3 of the 4 agencies reported lack of time and lack of comfort and/or confidence (especially in new counselors) as problems. Some common facilitators mentioned were: having a personality for it, prior experience in business or sales, knowledge about blindness accommodations, and opportunities to interact with businesses in a neutral setting. Some strategies suggested for agencies to consider were: use of personal networks, use of counseling skills with employers, establishing a personal relationship with an employer with ongoing contact, and utilizing job retention cases to establish an ongoing relationship.

Clicker Question: Would your agency be interested in staff training based on the results of this study, including how to reframe the way they view employer interactions?

Yes, I think my staff could benefit from training (94%)

No, I don't think my staff need this type of training (5%)

Panel Discussion

Panelists:

Kathy West-Evans, CSAVR

Juanita Barker, TexasDARS

Bobby Druesedow, Texas DARS

Brian Charlson, Carroll Center for the Blind

Please discuss how these findings could be applied in practice by VR agencies.

Employers seemed to have gotten a lot of their knowledge from having hired/worked with people who are blind. Our agency could use the work experiences (e.g., paid, unpaid, internships, volunteer) that we offer consumers to begin to form that relationship with the business, and create the possibility of full time jobs.

The biggest thing that we need to improve on, is that we could and should make more use of contacts from job retention cases and do more follow-up with those businesses where consumers are placed. Each year our staff are provided with a list of where consumers went to work, but we are not doing enough follow-up with these businesses. Follow-up should include not only checking on how the consumer is doing, but trying to

meet other needs of the business. That is a big area that we need to improve in, and that is probably true across the country.

I want to emphasize the point that businesses are made up of people, and everyone in the VR system is here because they're good at working with people. Businesses say "I just don't know what I don't know" and that is an opening to develop a relationship, to develop the trust. When you look at the barriers, if you understand their needs, and you understand what they feel are the barriers – and those are the attitudinal barriers that are huge. If you have a relationship with them and they trust you, they are going to tell you. VR is in a great position to help businesses, and we're not bringing disability, we're bringing talent. It's the way that we interact with them, and help them get over the barriers, and a lot it is fear-based, attitudinal barriers. Helping them understand how to solve accessibility issues, and that you are there to help them with it, and help the business build a strategic plan so they can fully utilize your talent (your consumers).

I want to remind you that when you speak of retention, and going back to those same companies, you already have the inside track with that consumer who works there. They should be a part of building that relationship with the business.

How have you made the dual customer approach, or Business Relations Model, a part of your agency's culture? (Asked of Texas DARS panel members)

For years we have been providing a 2-week training for all of our staff on employer interactions. The first week is in their office and the second week is in Austin, TX and this is done during their first year of employment. It is crucial that they understand the importance of going out and interacting with businesses, and that this is every bit as important as interacting with consumers. Mentors are also used to train new staff.

We keep encouraging them. Management support is such an integral part of having this type of culture. We cannot ever stop developing new relationships. We have a new endeavor that involves gathering data on businesses within the state to determine where the jobs are, what businesses we need to be targeting, and what jobs we need to be training our consumers for. We need to have consumers who can do the work that our business partners need.

We have specific standards and tasks for annual evaluation that include employer contacts. They are expected to do a certain number of business relations contacts.

We survey businesses to determine whether we are meeting their needs. We recognize our businesses annually: staff nominate businesses who we've worked with, and that helps to keep that relationship going.

We have regular meetings in our regions to strategize locations for potential business development. We have worked closely with Kathy (West-Evans) and the NET. We

revised our training, and came up with regional plans to increase business relationships, which increases employment outcomes for consumers.

We have a new initiative with the goal of increasing weekly average earnings for consumers. It involves five subprojects, including working with state and local governments and private businesses to anticipate job openings so that trained individuals can be ready.

What advice do you have for agencies who want to bring their practices more in line with the Business Relations Model?

First, make sure everyone in the agency understands that employment is not an afterthought in the VR process, but don't just think "jobs," think "careers." Talking about careers with consumers should happen at the beginning of the process.

It is important to make a good match (between consumer and job/business) and to be there for the long run. It's not job development that we want (placing one person in one job), we want long-term relationships. Every person we bring to a business adds value and talent.

Business relations is really about trust and understanding. If you understand the business, you can bring that understanding into your planning with a consumer, and you can help build a career for the person.

We have the largest talent pool of people with disabilities and we have the largest team of experts. Look at business as a partner in this process, not an enemy. We bring the solutions and the talent, we're not marketing disability.