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Research Report

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Outreach to Rural Businesses

In the 1990s, new regulations within the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and concern over the changing labor market led rehabilitation experts to advocate for greater attention to employer needs within the job development process. (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992). The resulting model is often called the dual customer approach because it positions both employers and people with disabilities as vocational rehabilitation (VR) customers. The goals of the dual customer approach were described in the 32nd Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) outlining the steps for developing a national VR business network (Anderson et al., 2006). These steps included delivering expertise and responding to VR customers as “one company,” preparing staff to successfully implement a dual customer approach, and encouraging collaboration between state VR agencies (Anderson et al., 2006).

Over the past several years, VR has made significant strides towards reaching its goal of developing a national business network. This is evident in the creation of a National Employment Team (the NET) and designated business points of contact in all public VR programs (rehabnetwork.org). However, whereas businesses’ demand for VR services has been well established in the scientific literature (Chan et al., 2010; Stensrud, 2007), little research exists on how VR develops and maintains business partnerships in rural areas. This factsheet addresses this gap by describing rural business outreach models.

Methods

A total of 82 VR informants, representing 37 states, participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews focusing on rural service delivery. Two researchers conducted telephone interviews with 21 counselors, 4 supervisors, 37 area managers, and 20 administrators. Informants came from 17 general, 12 blind/low-vision, and 19 combined VR agencies. Immediately following each interview, researchers created a document that they agreed accurately reflected the interview. Researchers coded these documents using QSR NVIVO 2.0 qualitative analysis software.

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Business Outreach Models

Informants (n = 49) from 35 agencies indicated that their agencies did some type of business outreach. Of these, informants (n = 37) from 25 agencies described a basic outreach model, and

In very rural areas, business outreach relies solely on personal community connections.

informants (n = 12) from 10 agencies described an expanded outreach model. The basic outreach model focused on making employer contacts to market the client to the employer. The expanded outreach

model, similar to the dual customer approach, focused on marketing VR to employers as an agency that provided job placement services. Both the basic and the expanded outreach models shared similar characteristics for making initial contact with employers. However, the expanded model included more information about following up with employers and maintaining contact over time.

Informants (n = 16) from nine agencies did not describe outreach models that fit the basic or the expanded definition. Rather, two explained a situation in which communities were so rural, outreach efforts relied solely on personal community connections; nine described situations in which they relied primarily on vendors for contact with businesses; and five did not describe business outreach other than to say it occurred.

Basic Business Outreach

Making initial contact with employers was similar across agencies whether they used a basic or expanded model of business outreach. This generally involved presenting at and attending community events. Informants (n = 24) from 22 agencies indicated that they or someone else in their office regularly attended local Chamber of Commerce meetings—the most frequently attended community event. In two instances,

informants were active members of their local Chamber. Six informants talked about attending job fairs, while one informant discussed sponsoring a job fair as a strategy for making contact with new employers. Another informant said she subscribed to all local papers and cold-called employers that she did not already know.

Three informants indicated that counselors were expected and encouraged to make initial contact with employers at local community events and by visiting employers on their lunch break and in between client meetings.

One informant said that his agency encouraged the use of flex time to attend employer events after work hours. Another informant described an employer blitz event every quarter to make new employer contacts. This

involved one day in the field making employer contacts and discussing job openings followed by one day in the office debriefing and matching clients to available jobs.

Our counselors participate in a quarterly employer blitz, which includes a day in the field making employer contacts followed by a day in the office matching clients to available jobs in the community.

Expanded Business Outreach

In the basic outreach model, relationships with employers generally did not extend beyond client placement. Although counselors often returned to the same employers for future job prospects, they did not offer extra services to the employer. In contrast, the expanded model described significant efforts to develop and maintain employer relationships.

Informants (n = 12) from 10 agencies said they used an expanded model of job development. In addition, one informant indicated that her agency had recently moved towards the expanded

model, following a successful pilot program. Informants from all 10 agencies actively marketed VR services to businesses. Examples of marketed services included providing information about the ADA, tax incentives,

We use an employer database to organize employer contacts and maintain contact over time. We have fields to record notes about past conversations, which provide a starting point for recontacting them.

follow-up services, and job retention. The ultimate goal of these outreach methods was to reframe how employers viewed VR. Primarily, agencies worked to market VR as a job placement organization rather than a disability service organization by developing long-term relationships with employers that extended beyond placement.

The benefit of developing these long-term relationships was highlighted by an informant who indicated that an employer was still open and excited to be working with VR despite a recent poor placement.

Informants described several methods for developing and maintaining long-term professional relationships with employers. Three informants discussed the maintenance of an employer database to organize employer contacts and maintain contact over time. In one instance, the informant contacted all of the businesses in her database every third Thursday of the month to discuss new vacancies and employee needs related to accommodations. Another informant said the database was used to keep from contacting employers too much and to record notes about previous conversations to prompt future conversations. One informant indicated that agency policy required a relationship with an employer prior to soliciting them for employment. An additional informant discussed developing a relationship with a local franchise manager and then using that relationship to expand to franchises in other areas.

Two informants discussed the importance of timely follow up with employers and of humanizing relationships by building rapport and sending holiday and thank you cards. Organizing community events was also identified as a way to build rapport. One agency sponsored events to recognize employers and facilitate conversations about hiring people with disabilities.

Perhaps the most beneficial and desired outcome of a strong employer/VR relationship was when the employer contacted VR with job openings and questions. Five informants representing five agencies indicated that they developed employer relationships that fit this description. One informant described a situation in which he helped an employer identify job requirements and rewrite job descriptions to assist with employee retention. Another informant emphasized the importance of follow-up services to facilitate lasting employer relationships.

Employment Specialist Services

Informants (n = 37) from 25 agencies indicated they had an employment specialist. Fourteen of these agencies said the employment specialist was wholly or partially responsible for business outreach, and eight of these described an expanded outreach model. One agency that utilized an expanded outreach model, but did not have an employment specialist to help with outreach, said counselors were often reluctant to do outreach because of a fear of the “unknown” or of reaching out to people they did not know.

Employment specialists are vital for serving rural areas because they have more time to develop and maintain relationships with businesses.

Informants (n = 5) from five agencies said that employment specialists served individual regions or districts and traveled extensively to meet and connect with local businesses. In two instances, employment specialists were shared by different government work programs. Reportedly, combining resources with other agencies streamlined and expanded services, allowing the employment specialist more time to reach outlying areas and reducing repetition of services.

Employment specialists were generally responsible for all business outreach efforts outlined above, but they had time to engage businesses more intensely than counselors who carried large case loads. One informant described the role of the employment specialist at his agency as connecting with employers who have historically been reluctant to work with VR. In addition, two informants described the importance of employment specialists for maintaining relationships in rural areas that were difficult to reach.

Rural Community Connections

While discussing business outreach, five agencies noted a difference between outreach in urban and rural areas. In general, outreach in rural areas relied on personal relationships and networking for the purposes of business outreach and job development. Overall, informants (n = 37) from 27 agencies discussed the importance of rural community connections for connecting with businesses in rural areas. The primary difference between rural community connections and the business outreach models highlighted above is the importance of personal, as opposed to professional, relationships. In rural communities, the counselor is the “face of VR,” and community connections determine success.

Informants did not describe any uniform approach for developing community connections. Strategies ranged from having a presence at all community events, to making small talk in line at the grocery store. One informant noted

the importance of maintaining rural offices so community connections could be cultivated and expanded.

Three informants said they used contracted service providers to develop rural connections when there was no rural office. Two informants indicated that approaching employers from a community consciousness perspective was a successful strategy for job development in rural areas.

In rural, who you know is as important as what you know. Counselors who grew up in the rural communities they serve often have established relationships that open doors for their clients.

In many instances, counselor effectiveness was determined more by who you know versus what you know. Informants from eight agencies highlighted the importance of hiring counselors from the area so they could build on lifelong relationships. Three informants noted difficulty maintaining these networks and finding appropriate replacements after a counselor left his or her post. One important reason for having continuity in counselors was trust, since rural communities were more suspicious of outsiders. Three informants noted the importance of building trust. Burning bridges even once with an employer led to a loss of that relationship and was a stain on VR’s reputation in the community.

Informants also described some facilitators for job development in rural communities. One informant noted that there is less staff turnover both internally and at other service agencies, which makes it easier to work together toward a common goal. Two informants noted that rural mom-and-pop businesses do not have strict hiring guidelines, which allows for more flexibility in the hiring process. These informants also noted the ease of access to decision makers with rural employers, rather than having to maneuver through several layers of bureaucracy common at larger firms.

Conclusion

Business outreach is a critical component of successful job development. Informants in this study described both basic and expanded business outreach models in rural areas. The basic outreach model, facilitating supply side job development, works well when there is a surplus of jobs, but does little to ensure placements when jobs are scarce and competition is stiff (Amir, Strauser, & Chan, 2009). The expanded model, facilitating a dual customer approach, is one possible solution for providing stable VR services as the economy fluctuates. By marketing VR to employers as a job placement agency and expanding employer services, VR could become a valued human resource expert (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992). This model could be especially useful in rural areas where small businesses hire infrequently.

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