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Research Report

Social Media Use within State Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

Increasingly, employers use company websites, job boards, and social networking sites to recruit and evaluate potential employees. In 1997, newspaper ads and employee referrals accounted for almost half of new business hires. Yet by 2009, online career sites replaced newspaper ads as a major source for new recruits (CareerXroads, 2010). Likewise, 75% of U.S. recruiters reported that their companies required online research of candidates, and 70% reported they had rejected candidates based on information found online (Bontke & Lawler, 2012).

Seventy five percent of U.S. recruiters reported that their companies required online research of candidates, and 70% reported they had rejected candidates based on information found online. (Bontke & Lawler, 2012)

The use of social media sites for job search and talent acquisition has implications for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors. Specifically, to best position consumers for employment opportunities, counselors need to provide guidance about developing positive online personas, posting web-based professional content, and searching and applying for positions online. Unfortunately, counselor access to social media is limited in many agencies due to strict state or agency policies, fears of confidentiality breaches, ethical concerns, and lack of information about how to professionally navigate an evolving landscape of sites, methods, and practices.

VR's current use of social media and online sources for job search and career planning was the focus of a rapid exploratory research project in a collaborative effort by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the University of Montana Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural). This brief report outlines project findings on VR's policies on access to and use of social media, along with related training procedures and identified needs.

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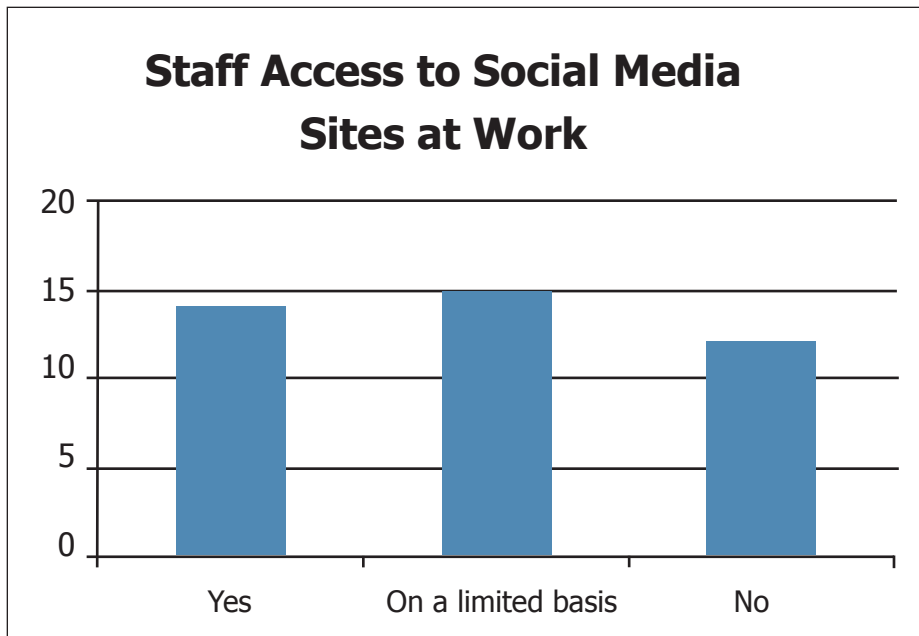


Figure 1. Social Media Access

policies regarding social media use (n = 25; 61%). One agency reported an agency specific exception to state standards, and the remaining agencies either had internal policies (n = 11; 27%) or were operating without guidelines (n = 4, 10%). Seven agencies submitted policy documents to us for review; two were memorandums of understanding between the VR and parent agency, four were internal agency policies, and one was a group of documents that included definitions, best practices, and social media content ideas.

Methods

This exploratory research was designed to understand (1) which social media outlets were used and supported by VR, (2) how VR agencies used social media at both the agency and counselor levels, and (3) what the existing capacity of counselors was to effectively use social media in practice. This research was conducted using an online survey, developed by two researchers at RTC:Rural and the Director of Business Relations at CSAVR. The survey was programmed into SurveyGizmo (an accessible, online survey platform), vetted by two current and three past VR administrators, and tested for screen-reader accessibility.

Participants. We distributed the online survey nationally to the CSAVR listserv of 80 VR administrators. We received a total 41 responses from 37 agencies including 16 combined, 14 general, and seven blind agencies. Four agencies had more than one survey responder. These responses originated from 31 different states and one inland territory and represented a 46% agency response rate.

Research Findings

Social Media Policies (n = 41). Most agencies were subject to state level or oversight agency

Both memorandums of understanding referenced overarching social networking policies provided by a parent agency. Within each memorandum, employees were allowed to access social media sites at work. One of the agencies developed social media content through a team of VR employees. The other prohibited staff from creating specific VR agency or employee social networking pages and encouraged them to suggest content and engage with the parent agency's social media pages.

The four internal agency policies were diverse in content and structure. All four policies included a definition of social media, but each defined it differently. Each policy addressed confidentiality in some form. At a minimum, policies prohibited disclosing personally identifiable information. One policy went much further by discussing encryption, plugins and steps to follow if computers were infected with a virus.

Of the four agencies, three had a parent agency that regulated social media through requests for permission. In one agency, individual employees were allowed to create social media pages with the approval of a supervisor. Another agency did not regulate social media use but instead controlled how employees could reference the agency on personal social media pages that identified the VR agency as their employer. This policy required employees to adhere to high

standards of personal conduct and to include disclaimers when discussing the VR agency. In addition, the agency asked employees to avoid communicating with present or former consumers through social media sites, and it recommended that managers avoid connecting with employees on social media sites. Three policies outlined the consequences of misuse, which included grounds for termination.

In general, policies did not provide detailed guidelines about developing appropriate content. Each policy did, however, include some guidance, such as checking for accuracy of information, using correct spelling and grammar, and no offensive material. To ensure compliance, two agencies logged all posts, including offensive or inaccurate posts that had been removed. One agency had multiple documents that indicated social media pages should highlight upcoming events, success stories, and include links to

external pages that referenced the VR agency. Another agency specifically discussed using social media to communicate during an emergency.

Two agency policies expressly stated the purpose of their social media activity. One agency used social media to augment its website, requiring any information posted on social media pages to also be posted on the agency website. The second agency recognized it as a way to better engage clients and partners and to receive valuable feedback about services.

Social Media Access (n = 41). We asked respondents if agency staff could access social media sites at work, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter (see Figure 1). Fourteen respondents (34%) said “yes.” Three of these provided additional qualifying comments that indicated sites could only be used for business or work-related purposes.

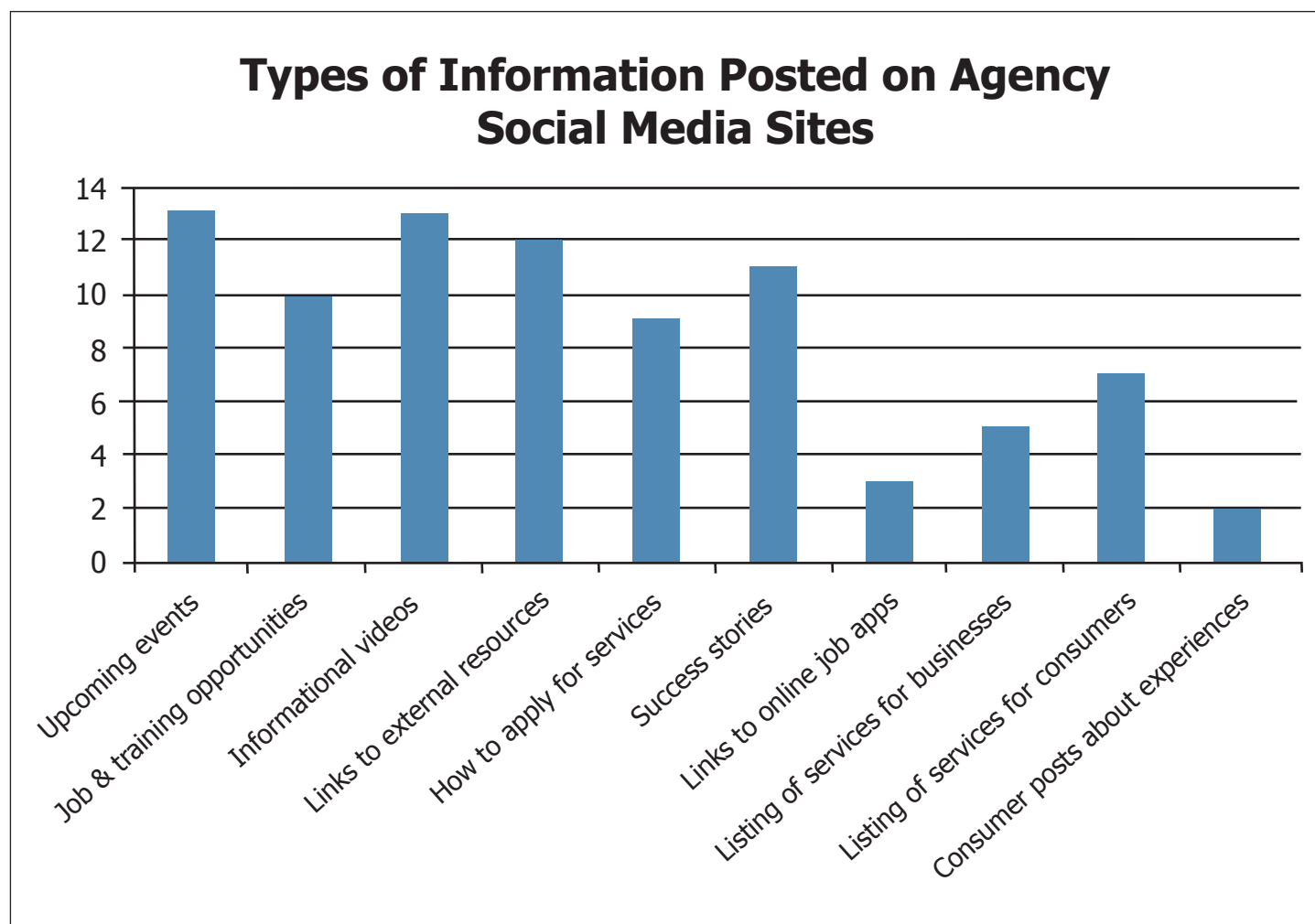


Figure 2. Social Media Use

Fifteen respondents (37%) said that staff could access sites “on a limited basis.” Of these respondents, 12 provided additional comments. Seven said that LinkedIn was allowed but other sites like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube were not; one of these seven indicated that the agency was moving towards expanded access to Facebook and Twitter since these were standard ways of communicating. Four responded that only certain staff had access or full access, and one said access was restricted to work-based accounts (as opposed to personal accounts).

Twelve respondents (29%) said staff did not have access to social media sites, but nine of these indicated that the agency was moving towards access in the future.

Social Media Use – Agency Level (n = 29).

The subset of respondents (n = 29) who said staff could access social media (fully or on a limited basis) provided additional information about their agencies’ presence online. Eighteen respondents (44%) said their agencies had a social media account, and 14 of these had a person dedicated to maintaining their pages.

Respondents said their agency had used Facebook (n = 16), LinkedIn (n = 6), Twitter (n = 9), and YouTube (n = 11) to post information. Figure 2 shows the types and frequencies of information maintained on agency social media sites.

Consumer Confidentiality on Agency Facebook Pages (n = 18).

The agencies that had a social media presence (n = 18) assigned certain staff members to screen content or to answer questions that visitors might post. Of these agencies, eight reportedly trained the designated people about minimizing confidentiality risks.

Agencies also took steps to reduce risks by posting public disclaimers about risks to confidentiality (n = 4), providing suggested guidelines for posting information (n = 3), and using internal staff to screen postings for identifying information (n = 8). One agency indicated that consumers had signed a public relationship waiver so the agency could describe their case as part of a VR success story.

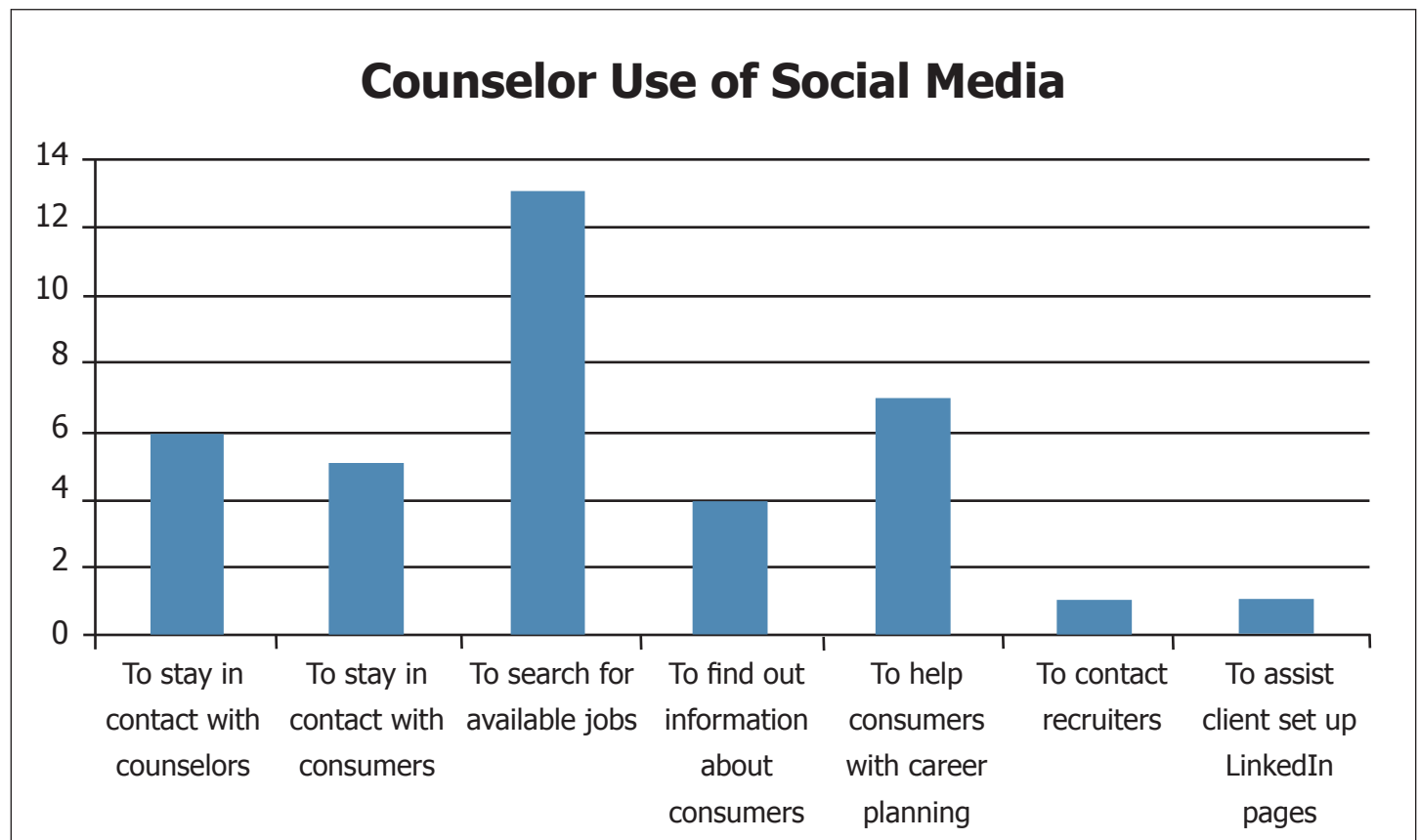


Figure 3. Social Media Use - Counselor Level

Table 1. Social Media Training

How prepared do you think your counselors are to:	Very unprepared	Somewhat unprepared	Somewhat prepared	Prepared	Very prepared
Assist consumers with finding job opportunities online?	0%	7%	52%	21%	21%
Assist consumers with posting resumes on social networking sites or job boards?	0%	31%	48%	14%	7%
Demonstrate techniques for online professional networking?	10%	38%	41%	10%	0%
Help consumers understand online personal branding do's and don'ts?	17%	31%	38%	10%	3%

Social Media Use - Counselor Level (n = 29). In addition to use at the agency level, we wanted to know how counselors used social media with consumers. The 29 respondents, who said staff could access social media, provided further information on how it was used by counselors. Nine respondents (31%) indicated counselors could use personal/professional social media sites at the office, and another nine (31%) said they could use them on a limited basis. The remaining 11 (38%) were not allowed to use social media within the counseling relationship. Figure 3 shows how social media was used by counselors (n = 18).

Of the 18 agency respondents who said counselors could use social media with consumers, six indicated the agency provided training for counselors about maintaining privacy on social media sites; six said the agency did not address privacy issues with counselors; four said the agency had policies on consumer/counselor relationships on social media sites; and two relied on ethical standards or guidelines set forth by the CRCC.

Training

Social Media Training (n = 29). Twelve respondents (41%) indicated that agency counselors had access to educational or training opportunities about social media use in the context of VR. Available social media training

was “very important” to 19 respondents (65%), “somewhat important” to nine (31%), and “not important” to one. Those who had training (n = 12) received it from TACE centers (n = 7), internal staff members (n = 3), external professionals (n = 4), and webinars (n = 1).

Respondents rated different aspects of counselor preparedness to use social media with consumers on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “very unprepared” to “very prepared.” The results shown in Table 1 indicate a need for training to include knowledge about posting resumes online, techniques and strategies for professional networking, and guidelines for assisting consumers with personal online branding.

Additional Comments on Training.

Respondents (n=25) provided additional comments about social media training. Nine said guidelines were needed on separating personal and professional use and on inclusion/exclusion criteria. Along these lines, eight respondents highlighted the need to address consumer and counselor confidentiality, and another six described the need for online ethics training.

Several respondents suggested training topics to improve employment outcomes including: online job search strategies (n = 5), how to engage employers and recruiters (n = 4), how to develop a professional online presence (n = 3), and

professional networking, including use of LinkedIn to network with businesses and find jobs (n = 2).

Four respondents said training in the mechanics of social media was needed, such as how to build YouTube videos, how to create and format smart social media pages, how to establish Twitter accounts, the types and uses of different social media sites, and navigation hints. Three respondents wanted information on the accessibility of social media sites so they could make recommendations to consumers. Finally, five respondents emphasized the importance of highlighting the risks and limitations of social media including the increased security and legal risks.

Highlighted Training Needs

Guidelines for Use
Confidentiality/Privacy Concerns
Ethics
Engaging Employers
Job Search Strategies
Branding
Networking
Mechanics
Accessibility
Security Risks
Legal Risks

Conclusion

The landscape of how businesses search for employees and how people communicate with one another is rapidly evolving. To provide effective employment practice, VR agencies are called upon to find ways to engage new methods while maintaining trusted practice in consumer confidentiality and counseling ethics. This research represents a starting point for establishing needed social media guidelines and training. It also demonstrates significant variance across agencies regarding social media use, where early, middle and late adopters are represented among agency respondents. Despite this variance, however, the evidence suggests that agencies are moving towards social media use with a desire for high standards when making this change in practice.

Next Steps

The research in this report provides the backdrop for continued inquiry. Future efforts in this area will include a comprehensive analysis of state and agency level social media policies to develop a policy template that incorporates (1) standards of practice and consistent definitions, (2) information gained from a counselor survey on the gaps in using social media as a career planning tool, (3) insight from business informants about current recruiting methods, and (4) recommendations on how VR consumers might best position themselves for employment opportunities.

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