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Research Report

Vocational Rehabilitation Service Delivery Using Telecommunication

Telecommunication offers a low cost solution to increasing client and counselor contact during the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process, particularly for clients at a distance from the VR office. Despite the advantage telecommunication provides, however, counselors report using email with fewer rural as compared to urban clients (Ipsen, Ricles, Arnold, & Seekins, 2012). In part, this may relate to counselor perceptions that rural clients have less Internet access than their urban counterparts (Ipsen et al., 2012). This disparity may be diminishing, however. Government incentives and public access in libraries and community centers are improving telecommunication infrastructure across the country, especially in rural places (Banerjee & Hodge, 2007; Federal Communication Commission, 2012).

In fact, a recent survey of 225 rural VR clients revealed that 67% could access a computer with Internet on a regular basis (Ipsen, Ricles, Arnold, & Seekins, in press). Further, while 39% of informants used email with their VR counselors, 63% felt it would be an acceptable way to communicate (Ipsen et al., in press). This gap indicates missed opportunities for counselor-client contact, a predictor of successful employment outcomes (Hein, Lustig, & Uruk, 2005). This factsheet describes results from a recent qualitative study that both confirm and expand on our previous telecommunication study findings.

Methods

A total of 82 VR informants, representing 37 states and 48 VR agencies, participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews, created to better understand rural service delivery issues and practices. A team of two researchers conducted telephone interviews with 21 counselors, 4 supervisors, 37 area managers, and 20 administrators and coded notes for common themes using the QSR NVIVO 2.0 qualitative analysis software. The following findings about telecommunication were in response to a general question about how counselors keep in touch with rural clients.

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Client-Counselor Communication

Informants from 44 agencies described ways they used telecommunications during the VR process. The majority said that both email and phone were viable methods for increasing client-counselor communication and contact rates. A few informants (n=8) also discussed texting as a possible method. Four informants said they asked clients about their preferred method of contact during the intake process and then honored the requested communication method throughout the counseling relationship. Table 1 summarizes pros and cons of each telecommunication method described.

Email. Twenty-seven informants said they used email to maintain contact with their clients. Ten informants said email communication allowed them to decrease travel costs. Eight said email

was used in place of face-to-face meetings and met agency level requirements for minimum client contact rates.

Three or fewer informants gave other reasons for using email such as it provided contact when inclement weather prevented travel; clients appreciated not having to always travel to speak with their counselors; it supplemented face-to-face meetings and increased counselor-client contact; it provided contact when clients would not answer phone calls because they were dodging creditors or their phones ran out of minutes; and it allowed the counselor and client to exchange documents quickly, such as medical records, documents requiring signatures, and job materials.

Three or fewer informants described some drawbacks to using email, including certain

Table 1. Telecommunication Method Pros and Cons

Method	Pros	Cons
Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcomes distance • Decreases travel costs • Quick access to counseling • Some clients respond better to email than telephone contact • No phone tag • Quick exchange of documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients email too often • Confidentiality concerns • Possible loss of honesty and respect • Harder to communicate in writing
Phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for keeping in contact • Better than email for assessing client understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running out of minutes, changing phone numbers • Clients dodge calls and won't answer • Spotty cell phone coverage • Counselor cell phones often not supported by the agency
Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for clients who avoid phone calls due to creditors, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality concerns • Counselor cell phones often not supported by the agency
Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for transition-aged clients since this is how they communicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality concerns • VR policy prohibits use in many states
Video Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases access to interpreters, because they can be located elsewhere • Good for communicating for deaf/hard of hearing • Provides linkages between offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not generally used for communication with clients

clients emailed too often; inbox maintenance was a daily struggle; appropriate boundaries were needed; confidentiality concerns were raised about clients sending and receiving personal information over the Internet, clients not taking proper security precautions; and VR staff perceived a loss of honesty and respect when communicating by email.

Phone. Almost all informants said phone was used to stay connected with clients. To encourage the likelihood of re-contact, three informants said the VR agency purchased “Tracfone” phones for clients. Five informants described issues related to phone contact, such as clients running out of minutes, difficulties maintaining contact with clients because of frequently changing cell phone numbers, or spotty/nonexistent cell phone coverage.

Five informants said counselors had access to work-supported cell phones, and six specifically mentioned that the agency did not provide work-supported phones. While one informant described a particularly dedicated counselor who gave out her personal cell phone number to clients, the practice was discouraged because of privacy concerns.

Text. Eight informants said they used texting with their clients. One informant believed that text messaging worked better than voice mail for reaching clients because the client did not have to retrieve the message. Another questioned whether texting was good counseling practice, and one said texting was prohibited because of confidentiality concerns.

Social Media. Two informants discussed client desire to connect on Facebook. In one instance, the agency did not support the use of Facebook because of confidentiality concerns. In the second, Facebook was allowed and used to connect with transition-aged students because students use it as one of their primary communication channels.

Video Conference. Three informants described how video conferencing was used to communicate with clients who are deaf and live

at a distance from VR offices. Two informants described a remote interpreter arrangement, in which the counselor and the client were in the same room and the interpreter was at a remote location.

Some state agencies used video conferencing to provide internal support between counselors or to conduct staff meetings between remote locations. This was recognized as important for keeping itinerant or one-counselor offices engaged with other personnel. Two informants also indicated that video conferencing was used to provide monthly counselor trainings.

Remote Offices

Informants from 14 agencies said they used some sort of remote office system, where the counselor could electronically access everything he/she needed while traveling. A remote office generally included scanned documents and access to a client data base such as case management software. One informant noted that remote offices allowed counselors to spend more time making connections with businesses, community partners, and clients in rural areas. However, another mentioned increased up-front costs to provide and maintain the necessary technology for remote office arrangements. For example, informants from three agencies said they scanned and then shredded hard copies of client files, and one indicated that counselors took scanners into the field.

Agency Policy

Despite noted advantages for reaching rural areas, some agencies had policies that did not support, or actively discouraged, telecommunication use. Examples of non-support included an agency’s lack of support for electronic signatures, which resulted in delays in document exchange, and a lack of work-supported laptops for use while traveling, which resulted in inefficiencies because counselors had to access a computer at a partner agency or return to their home office to type up notes.

Conclusion

Email, text messaging, and social media websites have changed how people communicate and have great potential for increasing VR service delivery options. As telecommunication technology continues to advance and as people embrace these changes, VR agencies will likely adapt and develop policies to reflect that growth.

A Tool: The Telecom Toolbox

In light of these changes, we recently developed a website to assist counselors with using telecommunication during the VR process. The website addresses a variety of topics including client and counselor readiness; strategies for improving email communication; confidentiality practices; encryption; and the use of social media, video conferencing, and on-line chat. To learn more, visit our toolbox at: www.telecomtoolbox.org

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