

What is Business Engagement?

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The Job-Driven Toolkits contain resources on promising and emerging job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR).

INTRODUCTION

Business engagement is interaction between employers, vocational rehabilitation (VR), and other workforce development and education organizations that results in measureable improvement in desired outcomes for both parties.

Engaging business and industry is a critical component to training and placing job seekers with disabilities. Business engagement can range from purely advisory interactions to long-term strategic partnerships. In a 2010 publication, the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce distinguished between a narrowly advisory or transactional role for employers, and one based on “strategic partnerships” (Parker, 2010).

Approaching employers as high-impact strategic partners means looking beyond the immediate needs of a program or college and seeking ways to make local employers or industries competitive. It requires building ongoing opportunities for problem-solving and program development. Doing so requires approaching employers in a listening rather than an “asking” mode: less “What can you do for us?” and more “Where is your pain? How can we help in addressing your challenges?” (Wilson, 2015).

PURPOSE

Effective business engagement bridges the gap between employer demand for an educated and skilled workforce, and the supply of workers with the necessary skills for the labor market.

While many agencies, colleges, and workforce organizations are increasingly focused on engaging businesses in the design of education

and training programs, research indicates that employers continue to struggle to find workers with the skills they need. Addressing this gap through business engagement is critical to the growth of the national economy and to ensure employment and advancement for all.

The public vocational rehabilitation (VR) system is poised to become the nation’s premier provider of careers for people with disabilities and of workforce solutions for business. By developing and executing innovative engagement strategies, the VR system and agencies add real value to businesses and to employment services for job seekers with disabilities.

A partnership with a VR agency can meet the following business needs:

- » Access to a new talent pool of qualified candidates for employment.
- » Access to a team of employment specialists and VR counselors with knowledge and expertise regarding the employment needs of people with disabilities.
- » Guidance and consultation regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act, accommodations, and accessibility.
- » Disability awareness training.
- » Consultation regarding Section 503 compliance and tax incentives.
- » Creation and funding of a range of work experiences including on-the-job training and internships.
- » Opportunities for collaboration with community colleges, community rehabilitation programs, and other organizations responsive to workforce needs of businesses.

For people with disabilities, a VR-business engagement model meets the following needs:

- » Access to accurate, timely labor market information for use in career decision-making and planning.
- » Increased opportunities for competitive, integrated work experiences prior to hire.
- » High-quality job matching services.
- » Increased personal interaction with hiring personnel.
- » Access to job openings customized to individual needs and abilities.
- » Higher-quality outcomes (wages, hours, benefits).

KEY PRINCIPLES OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

Developing robust relationships with business and industry can lead to positive outcomes for both the businesses and the job candidates. Business engagement ranges from purely advisory interactions to long-term strategic partnerships. The following qualities distinguish engaged relationships with employers from narrowly advisory ones:

- » **Continuous:** cultivating long-term relationships, rather than episodic, one-time, or short-term transactions on an as-needed basis.
- » **Strategic:** approaching business in the context of specific plans, opportunities, and objectives, rather than on a spot basis, when the agency needs assistance.
- » **Mutually valuable:** solving problems and creating value for both sides of the labor market: businesses (the demand side) and VR providers and consumers (the supply side).
- » **Wide-ranging:** engaging a variety of businesses by using varied methods to recruit and involve a large number, rather than relying on one or a few of the usual representatives.

- » **Comprehensive:** engaging businesses in a variety of issues and activities ranging from program development and competency identification to consumer advising and placement, and policy advocacy on critical issues.
- » **Intensive:** engaging businesses substantively and in depth, moving the conversations from a high level (“We need higher-skilled candidates”) to an in-depth dialogue about specific skill sets, long-term economic needs, and strengths and weaknesses of educational and VR programs in meeting them.
- » **Empowering:** encouraging businesses to develop and assume leadership roles in pathway development and other initiatives; approaching potential partners from business at the outset of the process, rather than near the end.
- » **Institutionally varied:** engaging business through a number of channels, including industry or professional associations, public workforce entities (Workforce Investment Boards, One-Stop Career Centers), chambers of commerce, labor-management training partnerships, and economic development authorities (Wilson, 2015).

Effective business engagement strategies are mutually beneficial for both the supply and demand sides. More broadly, business engagement strategies are useful for a number of reasons, including the following:

(1) Transactional: Effective business engagement strategies help to satisfy employer demand for an educated and skilled workforce. Successful outcomes include employers hiring qualified, work-ready candidates, further training for incumbent workers, and businesses and VR agencies jointly developing work-based learning opportunities for VR consumers and incumbent workers.

(2) Strategic: VR programs are aligned with business needs. Global markets and competition, persistent high unemployment, and rapid changes in technology make the need to understand employer demand in real time more important than ever.

Engagement in education and workforce development also has longer-term benefits for both the business and the broader community. Through strategic investments, businesses can foster regional economic development that creates and sustains a loyal customer base.

(3) Demand: Current demand for skilled workers is not being met effectively in selected sectors, like healthcare and STEM, and businesses are becoming frustrated and underused, but over-consulted. Successful business engagement strategies address this issue at the core and focus on developing focused and coordinated discussions and partnerships with potential employers.

- » Intermediaries—bring together educational and/or workforce development organizations to undertake employer engagement with employers or employer associations.

Employer engagement can take place at local, regional, and national levels. Local VR providers need to engage directly in a one-to-one relationship. This local lens is far more effective at helping local businesses and local job seekers have the best outcomes.

However, national or regional trade/membership associations can be instrumental in providing guidance to their members on frameworks for participation and general industry information. These associations can also act as a facilitator or convener on a larger scale. Again, it is critical to identify and work with all of the key stakeholders in your area.

ALL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS ARE NOT EQUAL

The figure on the following page demonstrates the Ladder of Business Engagement, developed by Jobs for the Future for use with community colleges and adapted by the JD-VRTAC for VR. The “ladder” indicates the possible progression of relationships between VR agencies and businesses, and emphasizes the distinctions among different kinds of engagement.

As we know, not all businesses will become strategic partners, but we aspire to develop all contacts into working relationships at least.

Following the figure, roles for VR and business are briefly defined.

KEY PARTNERS

Robust employer engagement strategies should include a number of stakeholders in the conversation. Examples of key participants include the following:

- » Business and industry associations.
- » VR agencies.
- » Education entities or providers—K-12 schools, including elementary, middle and high schools, as well as career and technical education (sometimes called vocational schools), charter schools, and alternate high schools, and post-secondary institutions including community and technical colleges.
- » Workforce providers—career centers, workforce investment boards, community-based organizations that provide education, training, and support services to youth and adults.

STEPS OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

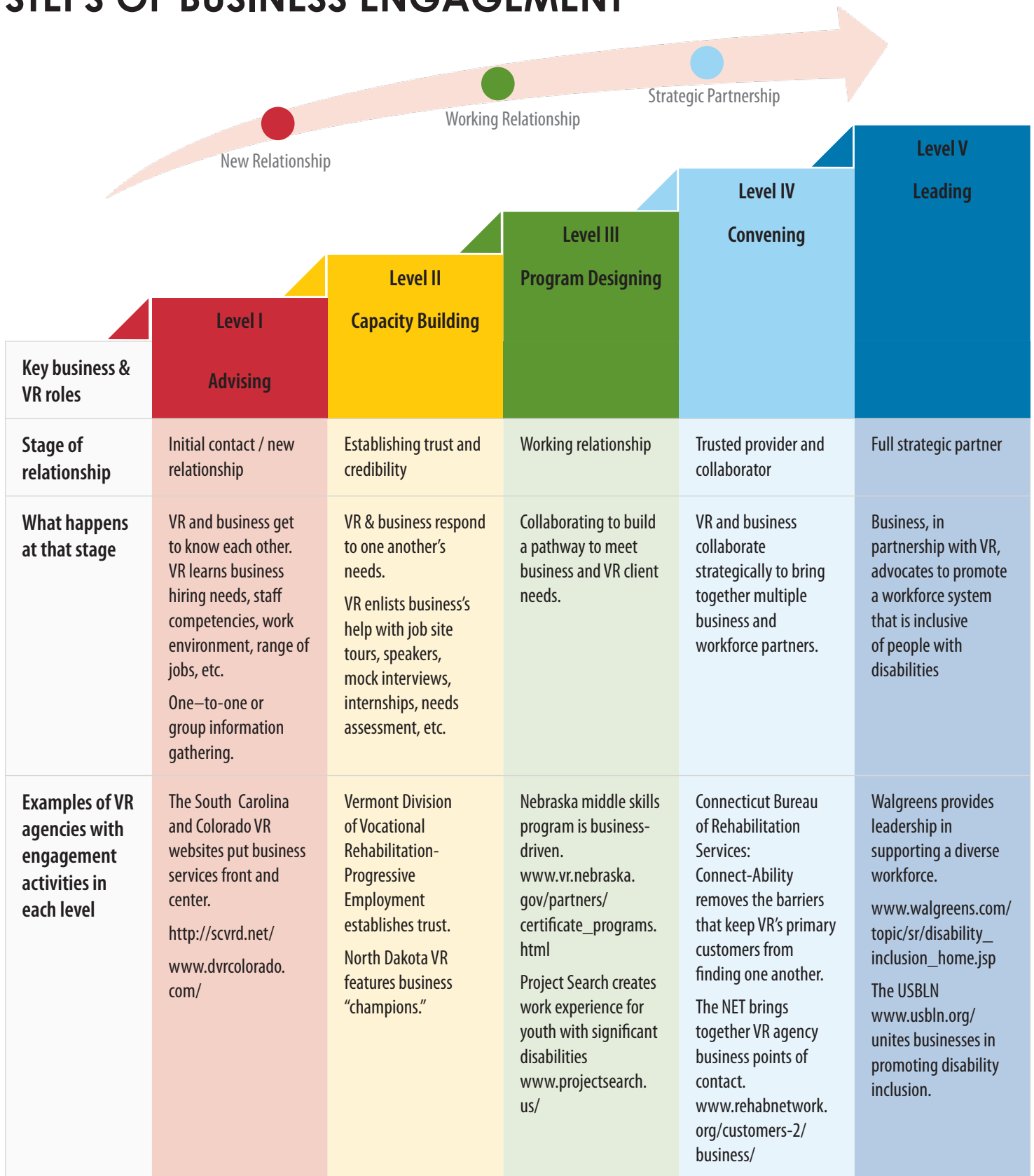


Figure adapted from *A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers*, by Randall Wilson, Jobs for the Future, 2015. The continuum concept of "new," "working," and "strategic" relationships is adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, *Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint*.

DEFINING KEY ROLES FOR BUSINESS AND VR

LEVEL 1: ADVISING

In the most basic form of business engagement, businesses are consulted informally about their hiring or training needs through interviews or surveys in a sector or region. More formally, businesses are represented on advisory boards for policy or program development.

Where advisors are engaged more strategically, VR shifts from seeking short-term “input” or job placements to collaborating with businesses to understand workforce challenges and support the success of businesses, VR consumers, and communities.

LEVEL 2: CAPACITY-BUILDING

VR professionals and businesses respond to one another's needs: VR provides customized training and skilled job candidates to individual firms; employers assist with mock interviews, mentoring, work experience sites, and apprenticeships or internships.

LEVEL 3: PROGRAM-DESIGNING

The business shifts from being a passive advisor to an active collaborator with the state VR agency and partners on workforce initiatives, including design of new training programs, grant funding, and design of career pathways.

LEVEL 4: CONVENING

VR professionals recruit and convene businesses and their associations as substantive, ongoing participants in addressing workforce needs. At a more intensive level, VR serves as a hub or broker of workforce collaboration with businesses and other education, training, and placement providers.

LEVEL 5: LEADING

At the most intensive level, VR, colleges, businesses, and other stakeholders build partnerships that transform local or regional workforce systems and enhance the growth of targeted industries or sectors. Some of the most effective and long-lasting regional and national partnerships are led by industry representatives.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Ladder of Business Engagement offers a framework for a VR agency to assess its current relationships and aspirations for building toward future strategic partnerships with businesses.

Levels adapted from *A Resource Guide to Engaging Employers*, by Randall Wilson, Jobs for the Future, 2015.

The following are a few questions for each level of engagement that might prompt leadership to further explore opportunities at each level:

ADVISING:

1. How does your state plan or strategic plan address business engagement or business services?
 2. As a director, how are you directly involved with the key employers in your state?
 3. What is your agency's process for receiving input from businesses on job openings and skill needs?
 4. How do you receive ongoing feedback from the business community regarding your agency's capacity to meet their hiring and/or support needs?
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CAPACITY BUILDING:

1. How is your agency structured to meet the needs of local businesses?
 2. Who is involved in the process of identifying and meeting business needs?
 3. How do you keep track of business engagement activities?
 4. How is business engagement and business services information shared throughout the agency?
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PROGRAM-DESIGNING:

1. Do you share goals for specific outcomes with businesses in your state? (e.g., business and VR have identified a common goal to develop certain technical or soft skills curricula in the workplace)
 2. How are businesses incorporated in your planning to meet legislative mandates?
 3. How have you included input from businesses or other partners on designing customized training to meet their needs?
 4. How frequently do you meet with businesses to establish or act upon common goals for a diverse workforce?
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CONVENING:

1. How do you work with business partners to bring together other businesses and/or workforce partners in a collaborative approach to meeting shared needs?
 2. How frequently do these gatherings occur? And are such activities regularly scheduled, or left to chance?
 3. Do businesses invite you or your agency to join boards or membership groups?
 4. What kinds of multi-business partnerships is your agency involved with?
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LEADING:

1. How do model employers that you work with identify and support current and future workers with disabilities?
2. Have you established formal structures and agreements to guide your relationship with employers?
3. Have you and your business partners held any events to recognize disability inclusion in the workplace?
4. If you recognize leadership capacity in a business in your state, how do you make the most of that potential?

These questions provide guidance in developing an approach to business engagement. They are a starting place, and should lead to deeper probing and analysis of the agency's effectiveness as a business partner.

In addition, the 32nd Institute on Rehabilitation Issues offers a maturity scales model that has application to self-assessment of business engagement and support. The maturity scales include 1) Approach, 2) Deployment, 3) Learning, and 4) Integration, and these four maturity levels can be applied to any specific area of business relationships and support.

The general self-assessment questions related to the maturity scales are:

- » **Approach:** Do you have a plan?
- » **Deployment:** How is the plan set in motion?
- » **Learning:** How can you incorporate continuous improvement in your approach and deployment?
- » **Integration:** Are business engagement plans and actions aligned with other business processes in your organization?

As you learn about structures, functions, roles, and competencies for business engagement and support, these questions may help you design and improve your activities and outcomes.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DIGGING DEEPER:

- » **Approach:** Do you have clearly stated goal for your agency's business engagement activities? Do you have a plan for implementing your business engagement goals? How will VR counselors be involved in business engagement?
- » **Deployment:** Do you have dedicated staff responsible for business engagement? Do they have time to perform business engagement activities? Do their job descriptions include their business engagement responsibilities? Do you have an effective mechanism for sharing job opportunities and other business needs throughout your agency? Do you have an effective system for posting qualified, available job seekers across the agency?
- » **Learning:** Is there training established to assist in developing business relations competencies? How can intra-agency communication strategies be improved if they are less than effective?
- » **Integration:** Do performance appraisals include the evaluation of business engagement activities? Is useful labor market information getting to your VR counselors? Are counselors using that information to inform clients about career options in the development of their IPE goals? Are all levels of leadership/management incorporating business needs in their unit goals?

Again, these questions are not exhaustive. They are provided to assist in developing an agency-wide approach to business engagement and support. As these questions are answered, new ones will evolve. For VR to become a trusted collaborator and strategic partner with business, we must never stop questioning and striving for attainable answers.



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