

Business Relations Structures and Functions: Highlights from Six State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Trailblazers

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Introduction

On March 3, 2016, the JD-VRTAC¹ hosted a targeted technical assistance forum on VR business relations structures, ***Developing a Business Relations Structure: Lessons Learned from VR Trailblazers***. At this forum, representatives from six State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (the “trailblazers”) presented on panels and facilitated round-table discussions about their agencies’ experiences engaging business as a customer. State VR Agencies (SVRAs) described their business relations structures and functions, how they determined a business relations approach, and the challenges they faced throughout this process.

The Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC) aims to identify, adapt, embed, and sustain job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR) that lead to improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The JD-VRTAC provides universal, targeted, and intensive technical assistance (TA) to state VR agencies (SVRAs) around engaging business and supporting employers and customized training² providers, as well as understanding and incorporating labor market information into VR practice.

Job-driven VR practices use the dual-customer approach to enhance employment outcomes for people with disabilities. This approach serves both businesses and job seekers as important customers in VR service provision. VR can build mutually beneficial relationships with businesses to address employers’ hiring challenges and create work opportunities and experiences for VR consumers. VR agencies across the country are developing business relations structures and approaches to strategically engage business.

In this brief, we discuss our reasons for hosting this forum, characteristics of various business relations models, examples of each SVRA’s business relations model, and questions for further research on VR business relations structures and functions.

Background

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act emphasizes aligning the needs of business and job-seekers by promoting job-driven VR practices. In July 2015, 15 SVRAs responded to a request for proposals to receive intensive TA through the JD-VRTAC. In this request, states were asked to identify one or more job-driven focus areas for TA. Eleven proposals were submitted and accepted.

Overwhelmingly, SVRAs sought TA around establishing structures to support their business relations efforts. As part of receiving intensive TA, SVRAs also participated in a learning collaborative (a type of Community of Practice) to share their strategies and solutions.

Because of the interest in business relations structures, the JD-VRTAC organized a forum to concentrate on this issue. We chose six states to present on their business relations structures based on the diversity of their business relations approaches, as well as the diversity of their agency structures, geographic areas and size, parent agencies, and experience engaging business as a VR customer.

We invited all SVRAs from the learning collaborative to send one representative from each agency to attend the forum. Additionally, we sent an open invitation to all 80 SVRA directors through the ExploreVR e-newsletter and through the Rehabilitation Services Administration contact list. In total, 24 representatives from 18 SVRAs attended the forum.

Each of the six “trailblazer” SVRAs presented their business relations structures in two panel presentations. Delaware Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, California Department of Rehabilitation, and Pennsylvania Office of Rehabilitation presented on the first panel. Vermont Vocational Rehabilitation, Texas Workforce Commission, and Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation presented on the second panel.

On both panels, each state described:

- » Goals and primary functions of their agencies’ business relations models;
- » Staff structure of business relations at their agency;
- » Agency approaches to communication about business relations;

- » Mechanisms for incorporating labor market information into business relations activities;
- » Business relations data collection and measures of success; and
- » Challenges their agencies faced throughout the process of structuring business relations units.

[Download SVRA panel presentations.](#)

In addition to the panel presentations, each state presenter hosted a roundtable to answer questions from participants and facilitate more in-depth discussions about their agencies' business relations structures.

Members from the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) Research Team presented findings from the [2014 National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation \(VR\) Agencies and Business Relations](#). This survey inquired about SVRAs' business relations strategies and activities; staffing and organizational structure; marketing, outreach, and business contacts; use of labor market information; and relations activities with small businesses. View the ICI Research Team's [presentation](#) on the survey results related to staffing and organizational structure.

The forum concluded with Kathy West-Evans, the director of business relations for the Counsel of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), interviewing Peggy Anderson, the administrator of the business relations program at the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, about the business relations structure at Alabama DRS, the longest-standing business relations program in the country.

Characteristics and Functions of Business Relations Models

Some common themes about VR business relations structures emerged during the forum.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICES LEADING TO EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

SVRAs emphasized the importance of broad business engagement strategies that go beyond job placement in serving the dual customer. Job placement is a one-on-one business relations approach: matching one job-seeking client and one employer. While job placement can be an important part of employer engagement, business engagement can also include providing education and services to that help familiarize businesses with VR and the hiring of individuals with disabilities.

SVRAs stressed the importance of listening to businesses to understand their work environments and hiring needs. Developing trust and sustainable relationships with businesses is crucial.

SVRAs took a variety of approaches to business engagement. You can read about some of these in the [Business Engagement Job-Driven Toolkit](#) on ExploreVR.

STAFFING AND MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE: CENTRALIZED AND DE-CENTRALIZED BUSINESS RELATIONS FUNCTIONS

Presenters described business relations in their agencies as either taking a centralized or a regional approach. Centralized business relations units are comprised of staff who are based in the central office and operate across the state. The regional model has staff based in individual field offices across the state.

Regional business relations staff work with VR counselors and engage business in their designated region. Some states employ business relations field staff who report to one business relations manager, whereas other states' business relations field staff report to individual office supervisors.

Learn more about business engagement models and functions in the [ExploreVR Job-Driven Business Engagement Toolkit](#).

STAFFING BACKGROUNDS: BUSINESS-SAVVY OR DISABILITY-AWARE?

Presenters varied on whether their SVRAs hire business relations field staff who have a background in business, marketing, VR, or another field. Read more about VR agency business relations staffing and organizational infrastructure in the ReviewVR brief: *The Dual-Customer Dynamic: How are state VR agencies changing their staffing and agency infrastructure to meet the needs of businesses?*

COMMUNICATION: SINGLE UNIT TEAM AND MULTIPLE COORDINATED TEAM

There are different ways to establish a communications structure across the SVRA to support a business relations approach. VR counselors and business relations staff can hold regular meetings, share cloud-based customer tracking forms, use databases for business relations activities, and communicate informally in shared office spaces.

At the leadership level, most of the panelists

emphasized the importance of maintaining close communication between the SVRA director and a business relations team leader within the agency. In agencies where there is a business relations manager/director, that position is included on the senior leadership team.

CUSTOMIZED AND CONSISTENT BUSINESS RELATIONS APPROACHES

The level of consistency also varies in each state's approach to developing business relationships. Some SVRAs take different initial approaches based on the size and scope of a business. Others use a single "sales pitch" script to make initial contact, and alter their approach based on a business's response.

INCORPORATING LMI INTO BUSINESS RELATIONS ACTIVITIES

SVRAs report using labor market information (LMI) from various local and national sources. Business relations staff often communicate local, on-the-ground LMI back to the counselors and other field staff.

State VR Agency Profiles

DELAWARE DIVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Delaware is a small state, with five DVR offices statewide, co-located in One-Stop Career Centers. Delaware takes a regional approach to business relations. One business relations specialist (BRS) works in each local field office with VR counselors. All BRSs report to one business relations manager (BRM) in the central state office.

As counselor caseloads have grown over the years, the BRS position was created to develop relationships with businesses and to assist with job placement. BRSs and VR counselors work as a team with consumers from the beginning of the job placement process to establish placement agreements.

BRSs also meet regularly with counselors to discuss labor market information. The BRM focuses on building business relationships at the state level, and oversees all business relations activities.

The BRS position at Delaware DVR does not require a VR background or college degree. BRS job performance is assessed by the number of placements, number of business contacts, and number of businesses who reach out to Delaware DVR as a resource.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION

California is an economically and geographically diverse state. Therefore, California DOR emphasized the importance of customized business relations approaches.

California DOR has a centralized business relations unit called the Workforce Development Services (WDS) unit. The WDS unit staff develop stable, ongoing relationships with larger, corporate businesses. WDS staff come from business backgrounds, and understand business language and culture.

In addition to this central unit, employment coordinators (ECs) work in local offices across the state with counselors, service coordinators, and office technicians. ECs engage with smaller, local business. They also do job placement and case management as part of the local office service delivery team.

In a large state like California, communication is key. ECs coordinate with WDS to learn about businesses on the state level. ECs also discuss VR consumers with WDS, and bring state-level employer information from the WDS back to the service delivery team.

PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Pennsylvania OVR values a branded, consistent model of business relations across their state. OVR has a centralized business services division comprised of business services representatives (BSRs), business services counselors (BSCs), and supervisors. One business relations manager oversees the division with support of three regional business services and outreach specialists for Western, Central, and Eastern Pennsylvania areas.

BSCs focus on job placement, IPE updates, cost services during employment such as on-the-job training (OJT), other on-boarding tools, and individual consumer activities. BSRs, also called "employment facilitators", manage business relationships. BSRs work out of each of the 15 field offices across the state.

The business services division meets regularly to discuss consumer cases and business relationships. Staff work together to present job placement trainings to consumers, update local office staff on business relationships, and publically recognize and appreciate OVR business customers. All business service staff receive ongoing training on labor

market information and business services. All OVR business services staff have been trained in the use of Cornell University ADA leadership network modules through the mid-Atlantic TransCend Inc. ADA Technical Assistance Center and have expertise in offering no-cost consultation on accessibility requirements under current Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) Accessibility Guidelines.

VERMONT VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Vermont VR focuses on building long-term business relationships that expand and strengthen over time. Business relations staff emphasize the value of customized, face-to-face business engagement. Vermont VR has designed its business relations approach after the staffing agency model: a temporary-to-permanent worker model where VR is seen as a staffing resource for employers.

To learn more about Vermont's Progressive Employment model, visit (<http://www.explorevr.org/content/vermont-progressive-employment-model>)

Vermont VR has a centralized employment team of VR staff and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). The employment services manager does macro-level job development and marketing on a state level. Business account managers (BAMs) do not carry consumer caseloads, and focus solely on local business outreach.

BAMs manage business relations activities locally, and are the primary point of contact for business on the employment team. Employment consultants (ECs) carry consumer caseloads, and support consumers through job placement activities.

Through this team approach, BAMs and ECs meet weekly at employment team meetings to discuss business relations activities and share contacts. The employment team communicates bi-weekly with counselors in "[Jobsville](#)" meetings to make referrals, share opportunities, and discuss labor market information.

TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION

Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) has recently revised its business relations approach to combine the efforts of the Rehabilitation Services Division and Blind Services Division. This was part of ongoing preparation to combine the divisions by October 2017.

Their once centrally managed business relations units in each division are now integrated and managed regionally utilizing outreach services coordination teams (OSCTs) to connect business partners with their customers. Texas OSCT's align with economic development regions. The Business Relations Coordinator's (BRC) lead each OSCT, which is comprised of various VR staff and community partners.

In addition to regional BRCs, TWC has nine Employment Assistance Specialists and two state-level Program Specialists that share the role of coordinating the state's business relations efforts.

NEBRASKA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

Nebraska VR emphasizes a team approach to business engagement, reflected in the agency's flat organizational structure. The VR consumer is central to all agency activities.

In Nebraska VR's centralized structure, the employment services program director supervises all business relations staff in the state. Three business account managers (BAMs) work across the state to develop business relationships, often through direct, face-to-face contact with businesses.

BAMs are not designated to specific offices in Nebraska, but work with placement staff and counselors across offices to communicate business contacts, labor market information, and job leads. BAMs are the primary points of contact for business.

Employment specialists (ESs) work in each field office with counselors and consumers to do job placement and development. BAMs and ESs meet weekly to discuss job leads, business contacts, and labor market information. BAMs, ESs, and counselors also meet regularly to discuss the needs of consumers and businesses. LMI is included as a part of the counselor/consumer career planning process.

Data Collection and Measures of Success

There are various data collection systems available to SVRAs. Many SVRAs face challenges around how to integrate business relations data with their consumer case management systems. The “trailblazers” collect a variety of business relations data, including:

- » Business demographics and contact information
- » Number of businesses and federal contractors contacted by VR
- » Employers' willingness to hire/history of hiring ex-offenders, employees under 18, and other populations
- » Consumer trainings provided by businesses, such as on-the-job training and VR funds allocated for on-the-job trainings
- » Internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and other work opportunities that businesses provide
- » Disability awareness and etiquette trainings VR provides to businesses
- » New or expanded business relationships that resulted from other business relationships and workforce partnerships
- » Successful job placement and retention
- » Business satisfaction after hiring or providing VR consumer work experiences
- » VR consumer earnings

SVRAs have many common measures of success for business engagement. Some measures are focused on employment outcomes and others on business contacts, services, and activities.

View video interviews from the Business Relations Structures forum [here](#).

Challenges and Questions for Further Research

The 2014 business relations survey illustrates staffing patterns in various VR agencies, yet leaves many unanswered questions about the structure of VR agency business relations units. Like all surveys, the information gathered in 2014 represents data from a single point in time, and does not allow for the measurement of trends or changes over time that could help us understand agency-level decisions to create business relations units.

The six “trailblazer” agencies shared valuable information during the forum that provided a deeper perspective of their agency decision-making and organizational structures. We hope to collect this level of detail from all 80³ SVRAs.

To improve the quality of the data collected, make it more generalizable, and gather longitudinal data on as many agencies as possible, we will be conducting a series of surveys and in-depth semi-structured interviews with additional SVRAs. We will use these semi-structured interviews to probe deeper on questions that could not have been asked in a web-based survey.

Unlike surveys, which aside from open-ended questions require individuals to respond in a particular manner, semi-structured interviews are less rigid, and give the interviewer some flexibility to ask questions based on answers provided during the interview. We hope that alternating between semi-structured interviews and web-based surveys will help us develop a profile of agencies' business relations units.

Some research questions that we will explore by conducting semi-structured interviews include:

- » What role do community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) play in business engagement/business relations at your agency?
- » What type of staff have business relations functions in the agency? Who do those individuals report to? How many full-time equivalents (FTEs) do they spend on business relations?
- » Do you have a business relations unit? If so, when was this unit created? Please describe your unit's organizational structure.

Conclusion

Business engagement is a key component of strategic job-driven VR practice. By viewing job seekers and businesses as dual customers, VR can address their complementary needs for quality work experiences and a skilled workforce.

Visit ExploreVR to learn more about the JD-VRTAC and business relations practices.

Sources

ExploreVR. (2015). JD-VRTAC job-driven toolkits. Retrieved from <http://www.explorevr.org/toolkits>

Additional Resources

ExploreVR Job-Driven Toolkits:
<http://www.explorevr.org/toolkits>

Developing a Business Relations Structure: Lessons Learned from VR Trailblazers SVRA Presentations: <http://www.explorevr.org/sites/explorevr.org/files/files/JD-VRTAC%20Business%20Relations%20TA%20Forum%20PowerPoint.pdf>

Data from the 2014 National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Business Relations:
<http://www.explorevr.org/lab/#analysis>

ICI Research Team's Business Relations Forum Presentation:
http://www.explorevr.org/sites/explorevr.org/files/files/BR%20Data%20Presentation_TTA%20Forum.pdf

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR): <http://www.rehabnetwork.org>

Vermont Progressive Employment Model:
<http://www.explorevr.org/content/vermont-progressive-employment-model>

Vermont VR Jobville Meetings Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8kKFAMBuMc&feature=youtu.be>

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² Customized training programs address the skills gaps for job-seekers who are interested in acquiring skills of a specific industry or trade, and that meet the hiring needs of specific businesses or industries (ExploreVR, 2015).

³ This number is currently in flux as many states with multiple agencies (i.e., agency for the blind and a general agency) or in the process of combining these agencies.

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