

## Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

### Business and Vocational Rehabilitation Can Build Partnerships for Employment Success

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is a series of programs and services designed to help a person with a disability find and keep a job or return to work after injury. These services are most often provided by counselors at a VR agency. VR counselors spend a lot of time getting to know the individuals with disabilities they work with, understanding their needs and abilities, and supporting them as they find their place in the workforce. According to a new study, VR counselors and VR agency personnel can improve outcomes for job seekers with visual disabilities by building equally strong relationships with employers and area business organizations.

Researchers from the NIDILRR-funded [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment Outcomes for People who are Blind or Visually Impaired](#) at Mississippi State University conducted a study to find out what employers considered important factors in their working relationship with a VR agency to hire a worker with a disability. Specifically, the researchers interviewed employers who had worked with VR agencies to hire someone who was blind or visually impaired. Employers shared their perspectives on what made for a successful partnership with VR agencies, problems they encountered in partnering with agencies, and how the relationships could be strengthened to benefit both employees and the business community, leading to more opportunities for job seekers with disabilities.

In the interviews, researchers found several common elements underlying a strong agency-employer relationship that leads to one or more successful placements for job seekers with visual disabilities. According to employers in the study, several factors contributed to the best relationships:

- Responsive, reliable staff – Counselors and agency representatives were available to provide support to employees and human resources personnel. Quite simply: “They’re there when you call.”
- Knowledgeable counselors – Counselor and agency representatives understood the business perspective and were aware of employers’ needs. These counselors made sure they were referring qualified candidates. The counselors were able to answer questions and keep employers and clients up to date about accessibility, accommodations, and assistive technology.
- Trusted representatives – In the stronger relationships, counselors and agency representatives made employers feel comfortable discussing difficult or sensitive topics.
- Following through – Counselors stayed in contact with placed employees and hiring personnel, providing support and new resources as needed.

In their interviews, employers who were satisfied with their relationship with VR agencies said they were more likely to hire one or more candidates with disabilities. They also shared advice on how VR counselors and agencies could build strong relationships with businesses in their community.

- Connect and reconnect—Employers recommended reaching out to HR managers, introducing the agency and its staff, and explaining what services are available to help employers in hiring and supporting employees with visual disabilities. Reconnecting with previous employer partners was also recommended.
- Network – Employers suggested that agency personnel attend and present at meetings for local chambers of commerce and state and national meetings for the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the largest HR-focused organization in the US.
- Educate – Employers recommended counselors discuss how a person who is blind or visually impaired would perform work tasks, and demonstrate how assistive technology works and how it fits in the workplace. Sharing success stories may be another good step.
- Make the employer/counselor partnership a long-term relationship – Employers suggested that the partnership could continue beyond placing a new employee. Counselors could follow up with the employee and the employer, be responsive and supportive, and be a resource for new information on assistive technology and workplace supports. They recommended planning ahead to transition employer contacts as staff members leave or retire.

Based on these interviews, the authors suggested that when counselors and agencies take the time to build strong, long-term relationships with employers, employers may be likely to consider hiring one or more candidates with visual disabilities.

Although this study focused on employers and VR personnel who work with people who are blind or visually impaired, the authors suggested that strategies and recommendations made by the employers may also be useful in supporting other job seekers with disabilities.

### **To learn more:**

Local business organizations offer many opportunities to connect and network with employers. Contact the local chamber of commerce and or business association. The US Chamber of Commerce offers a [list of accredited state and local chambers](#). A local public library can also help identify other business organizations in the community.

Find a state chapter of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) and connect with local HR professionals. [Here's a list of state SHRM conferences for the year.](#)

The MSU's National Research and Training Center offers more information and resources on the effectiveness of VR agency-employer interaction practices at <http://blind.msstate.edu/research/projects/project.php?id=3>

Additional resources are available from the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) at <http://www.rehabnetwork.org>.

To locate a state VR agency, visit the Job Accommodation Network at <http://askjan.org/cgi-win/TypeQuery.exe?902>.

**Learn more about this study:**

To read the original article: McDonnall, M. C., and A. Crudden (2015) [Building relationships with businesses: Recommendations from employers concerning persons who are blind/visually impaired](#). *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(4), 53-50. This is a free, full text PDF made available by the grantee.

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