

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

Employers Who Have Relationships with Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies May Be More Likely to Hire People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

People with visual impairments have difficulty seeing, even with glasses or contact lenses, or are unable to see at all when they are blind. Statistics show that working-age Americans with visual impairments have much lower employment rates than their peers without disabilities. Past research has found that inaccurate perceptions about people who are blind or visually impaired contribute to this low employment rate. For instance, employers may not know whether people who are blind or visually impaired could use computers or office or job-related equipment, or they may think that accommodating an employee who is blind or visually impaired would be too expensive. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies can lessen these concerns by building relationships with hiring managers, connecting them with qualified job candidates who are blind or visually impaired, and offering technical guidance and support during the hiring process and beyond.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, the researcher wanted to know whether there would be an association between hiring managers' level of contact with VR and their willingness to hire people who are blind or visually impaired. The researcher wanted to find out whether hiring managers who had more extensive contact with VR agency staff were more likely to report a history of hiring people who are blind or visually impaired, showed stronger intentions to hire people who are blind or visually impaired in the future, or had more positive attitudes about hiring people who are blind or visually impaired in general.

A researcher at the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment Outcomes for Individuals Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired](#) sent an online survey to 382 hiring managers across the United States. On the survey, the participants were asked whether they had ever communicated with their state's VR agency about hiring people with disabilities, and whether those communications were once in the past, occasional, or ongoing. If the participants indicated that they had communications, they were then asked whether the communication included discussion of hiring people who are blind or visually impaired. The participants were also asked whether or not they had ever hired a person in the past who was blind or visually impaired, and how likely they would be to hire someone who was blind or visually impaired in the future (on a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all likely" to "very likely"). Finally, to measure attitudes about hiring people who are blind or visually impaired, the participants were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with 11 statements, such as "people who are blind or visually

impaired would be able to perform work of the same quantity as sighted people at my company” and “our customers might feel uncomfortable having a person who is blind or visually impaired help them”.

The researcher found that:

- VR contact was common, but ongoing relationships were rare: 38% of the participants reported communicating with their state’s VR agency, and most of these communications had included discussion of people who are blind or visually impaired. However, only about 9% of the participants in the full sample reported having an ongoing relationship with their VR agency.
- VR contact was associated with hiring: More than 71% of the participants who had VR contact had a history of hiring people who are blind or visually impaired, compared with only 9% of those without VR contact.
- VR contact was associated with intentions to hire: Among those participants with an ongoing VR relationship, more than half said they would be “very likely” to hire a person who was blind or visually impaired, compared with only 10% of those participants without VR contact.
- VR contact was associated with more positive attitudes: The participants who had discussed people who are blind or visually impaired with VR reported more positive attitudes than those participants who had no contact with VR or who had only discussed other disabilities. Those participants with an ongoing VR relationship also reported more positive attitudes than those with only single or occasional VR contact.

The author noted that the participants were not asked how contact with their VR agency was started, or whether this contact occurred before or after they hired a person who was blind or visually impaired. It is possible that the participants started a relationship with the VR after they had already hired someone who was blind or visually impaired, and their positive attitudes could be linked to their past experience with employees who are blind or visually impaired rather than with the VR contact. Future research may be useful in identifying the best ways for VR staff to reach out to employers, and the impact of such outreach on hiring behavior for employers who have had no prior contact with people who are blind or visually impaired.

According to the author, state VR agencies can help promote positive attitudes in the business community toward hiring people who are blind or visually impaired. VR counselors and staff may wish to reach out to businesses to build ongoing relationships and educate hiring personnel about the methods that people who are blind or visually impaired use to perform job functions, what assistive technologies and accommodations they may use, and the resources available to employers to address concerns about costs, compliance with state and federal disability rights laws, staff education, and other issues. It may also be helpful for VR agencies to designate “business relations staff” whose job it is to connect with employers and communicate with them about the

business benefits of hiring people with disabilities, including people who are blind or visually impaired.

To Learn More

Research in this area continues at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment for Individuals with Blindness and Other Visual Impairments:
http://blind.msstate.edu/research/current-research/RRTC_2015.php

The National Technical Assistance Center on Blindness and Visual Impairment, a part of the The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision offers assistance for job seekers, employers, and service providers.

- Resources for VR agencies and other service providers: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/providers/> including free continuing education courses: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/courses/>
- Resources for employers: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/businesses/>
- Resources for job seekers: <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/consumers/> including Career Advantage employment preparation program and a transition activity calendar for young people with visual impairments transitioning from school to work

The National Federation of the Blind offers resources for both job seekers who are blind or visually impaired and employers interested in hiring or supporting employees with visual impairments: <https://nfb.org/working>

To Learn More About this Study

McDonnall, M.C. (2017) [The relationship between employer contact with vocational rehabilitation and hiring decisions about individuals who are blind or visually impaired.](#) Journal of Rehabilitation, 83(1), 50-58. This article is available from the NARIC collection upon request.

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