Successfully engaging the business community in the vocational rehabilitation placement process

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Abstract. This article is an abstract of a best practices presentation made November 7, 2007 to national Veteran’s Administrative personnel in Atlanta, Georgia. It initially reviews the relatively minimal research related to effective vocational rehabilitation placement strategies with the business community. The larger portion of this work deals with external and internal vocational rehabilitation (VR) program strategies for effectively engaging the business community adapted from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Project with Industry (PWI) program. External strategies include securing the support of veteran’s groups and service groups such as Rotary, and staff memberships in employment-related organizations such as Chambers of Commerce, Human Resource (HR) organizations, HR diversity subcommittees, etc. Internal strategies include include developing an employer board, using a business advisory committee composed of HR representatives, developing a job fair cycle at your site, and involving employer/business volunteers in roles critical to your vocational program’s success. The approach basically involves such frequent and substantive interaction between business and one’s VR program that vocational placement activity becomes an almost seamless transaction between the vocational rehabilitation unit and the business community.

1. Introduction

There have been a number of reviews of rehabilitation placement outcome efforts over the years [2,8,10]. Most of the efforts reviewed did not have a solid empirical base or the methodologies used were so flawed that findings were not credible. On a very concrete basis, within the field of rehabilitation there has been no systematic examination of what encourages employers to hire qualified applicants with disabilities or what employment strategies work best with different employers [8]. Existing studies do indicate that employers are interested in agencies that can meet their needs [3]. It has also been found that employers desire VR clients with work and interpersonal skills who have been prescreened for specific job openings and that employers desire followup services [9]. Other findings suggest that employers do appreciate tax credits and on-the-job training funding for their trainees [4]. Finally, it also appears obvious that employers who are contacted most frequently in relation to hiring qualified workers with disabilities are also those that hire most frequently [11].

Unfortunately, Young et al. [9] in their study indicated that only 30% of the employers surveyed had identified themselves as having been directly contacted by vocational rehabilitation agencies. Direct contact does appear to be better understood and received by employers than general mailing approaches or more global media public relation efforts that appear to be ineffective [5,8]. Much of the existing research on effective partnerships between vocational rehabilitation agencies and the employment community was done in the 1970s and 1980s and research activity seems to have waned in recent decades.

Buys and Rennie [1], through survey research, however, more recently identified elements of effective part-
nership to include: a) a commitment to community responsibility by employers, b) competency in service delivery by the vocational agencies (responsible, reliable, and consistent), c) the development of trust between agencies and employers, d) a customer focus by agencies, e) a clear exchange of benefits between employers and agencies relative to hiring qualified employers with disabilities, and finally, f) an extensive period of working together in a satisfying manner.

Unger [6] describes several recent collaborations between rehabilitation agencies and Manpower, Incorporated in the South and Cincinnati’s Children’s Hospital which are noteworthy, but the author acknowledges that “there is limited empirical evidence that documents the critical components of a sustainable rehabilitation and business partnerships” [6, p. 45]. These elements, in the main, continue to be rather ill-defined and elusive.

From this author’s years as director of an RSA funded Project With Industry (PWI) program and work within the International Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation (INABIR) involving the national movement of Projects With Industry, there are a number of strategies that have worked in facilitating the placement mission within both the the University of Washington PWI and other PWI’s nationally – a number of which are standardly used (or even grant mandated) across these programs. These considerations are reviewed as follows by category of interest. It should be noted that these strategies can be utilized as relevant to even a small vocational rehabilitation unit (e.g., one to two employment specialists) or those larger. In fact, some smaller vocational rehabilitation units can really need to more strongly enlist business involvement in their cause in order to have more resources and have meaningful success.

1.) Who is your VR job seeker constituency? In this case we are obviously concerned with qualified workers with disabilities. It is important, however, for each vocational rehabilitation unit to understand the general functional ability profile of their clients that are being served. What are the types of skill bases that these clients have and the frequent job-related challenges that they appear to encounter. Finally, it would be important to geographically profile the clients desiring employment because this helps to better target companies for which the clients have better transportation access or, in fact, to identify the transportation services that are needed in order to better access jobs. It is assumed that the job goal viability for a program’s clients has already been established through formal vocational and/or situational assessment procedures, if supported employment is unavailable.

2.) What are some of the variables to be considered in approaching the employment community? It can be of critical import to understand the labor market and the more available high access jobs within your target area. Understanding unemployment and underemployment in your area is also helpful as it can highlight the type of effort that your unit will need to make within the community, e.g., with low unemployment rates, employers are more likely to be willing to come to your site for job fairs (scheduled several times a year at our center), presentations, and other types of relevant activities providing access to workers. When the unemployment rate is very high, these employers can become less accessible as they can have sufficient workers. Outreach then requires a greater effort on your part in order to make direct employer contact, assess their needs, profile your client job seekers, and present the benefits of working with you.

3.) How are my employer and business contact goals identified? Your target employers and businesses are really a function of careful evaluation of the interaction between the general functional ability profile (viz., cognitive, physical, and sensory capacities) of the clients to be served, their skill base (e.g., software use capacities), and their geographic availability. These types of client considerations then need to be evaluated within the context of the available job types in your local economy. This type of analysis needs to be done, using regional employment data and often with the aid of an employer board or business advisory council, before targeted placement efforts are initiated in the community. Otherwise, placement efforts become random, untargeted, and less productive.

4.) In approaching the business community, what is an ideal approach? As referenced earlier, direct contact is optimal. In a best case scenario, your unit is able to make contact with ownership and upper level management in order to develop a “top down” type of working relationship. Basically, upper level management can direct Human Resources (HR) and other company leadership personnel to more fully engage with your vocational rehabilitation placement effort. There is no question, however, that individuals at mid-management or human resource level professionals can make a very big difference with committed efforts to vocational rehabilitation outreach and leadership within the company. Successful hiring of qualified individuals with disabilities by these personnel can also have very positive “bottom-up” repercussions with senior management or encourage other department heads to hire.
5.) How does your staff more fluidly engage with the business community? There are a number of options to consider here. First, it would be important to try to make your mission part of or absorbed within the mission(s) of local service organizations, specifically such as Rotary or Kiwanis Clubs. It is through the ranks of these community service groups that a communitywide commitment can really be ignited in better meeting the employment needs of your clients. It is very important that a unit maximize the interaction of all staff with the target community employers and businesses. The vocational rehabilitation director needs to evaluate which staff members might do best as liason to what community organizations. For example, some staff might play exceptional business liaison roles by becoming members of local chambers of commerce or human resource associations. Some of these chambers and human resource associations also have diversity subcommittees which make an extra effort to outreach and serve the employment needs of minorities and those with disabilities. If you or your unit is integrated within a medical rehabilitation team, could the medical director or other administrator become a member of Rotary or is this a role for the vocational services director? What other members of the team could be involved in other community organizations that can assist with employment access?

Area Rotary Clubs can be invaluable inasmuch as “Vocational Services” is one of four major service committees within every Rotary Club internationally. These vocational service committees are often looking for community career-oriented and vocational mentoring activities that they can perform within the local area. In some cases the Vocational Services Committee is actually looking for a mission. Your unit’s vocational placement needs can be that mission or become part of that mission. The benefit of Rotary is also exposure to individuals, who as club members, represent diverse businesses and enterprises at an ownership or upper managerial level – providing that “top-down” emphasis on hiring your clients if they commit to your program. Several of the University of Washington PWI employer board provided very basic business-oriented advisement on our activities while members serve as a consistent source of advocacy activity and network contacts within the community. The national Projects With Industry (PWI’s) are required to have an employer advisory board. In the case of the author’s PWI, the board incorporated as a nonprofit Neurological Vocational Services almost two decades ago and has been a driver in all our business interaction and placement activity. On the advisement of our board, a separate Business Advisory Council (BAC) was established involving upwards of 40 to 50 human resource (HR) professionals.

In contrast to the employer board’s monthly meetings, the BAC meeting involves a quarterly breakfast with a speaker of interest to HR professionals. Part of the breakfast session also involves direct advisement not only on Project activities, but on the current job market and areas of training (particularly shortterm training advisement such as medical coding/billing, pest control, RV repair, etc.) that are valuable and needed within the employment community. This BAC, as another example, recommended scheduled job fairs at our facility. A recent job fair resulted in several direct hires, nine to 10 individuals now in a second round of interviews and “hiring partnership” agreements being negotiated with two companies. BAC advisement has been very helpful to this Project with Industry.

As employers get more involved with your program, it becomes possible to identify, through “word of mouth,” business people who are retirees and others who would like to assume a volunteer role that is assistive to your Project. For example, at our program, two retired business owners schedule meetings, interact with members of the Business Advisory Council, and maintain district level Rotary support for the PWI. Business people are also recruited for involvement in our client job seeking skill clubs and our career enhancement class (a dinner program presented quarterly) that is geared to assist clients with job retention once placed. This interaction provides our clients with ongoing exposure to employers. Some clients have been directly hired out of the job club by the visiting employer facilitator. Access to employers is obviously functionally important, but the contact also has a very positive and sustaining emotional impact on vocational clients. It provides a sense of optimism and a message that they will be successful.

7.) How valuable can an incorporated employer board as a nonprofit actually be? The University of Washington PWI employer board provides very basic business-oriented advisement on our activities while members serve as a consistent source of advocacy activity and network contacts within the community. Based upon needs that the employer group has identified through ongoing contact with our program, fund raising (for diverse client needs such as job coaching),
travel monies, certification, etc.) has also become a major thrust of their activities to include an annual auction and other social/recognition events. In addition to fund raising, these efforts build a community and business constituency that is very knowledgeable and, over time, very committed to our program and the employment outcome of our clients. Presently this board is moving into a subcommittee structure (finance, public relations and development, etc.) with non-board members from the Business Advisory Council also being invited to participate within this committee structure.

8.) What role does publicity play in the success of a vocational rehabilitation program? Advertising and public relations activities are very important in the success of an active vocational rehabilitation placement program. On a very basic level this involves identifying a mailing list of appropriate employer recipients who have jobs that are key to the needs of your client base. Active contact can be conducted through “email blasts,” actual mailings, or both, in which clients are advertised in relation to their specific job skills. Advertising and perhaps, more importantly, human interest stories in business and trade journals can also be an invaluable source of outreach. A quarterly newsletter from your VR program can also be part of the advertising menu (an ideal job for a skilled volunteer). Less expensive advertising is often available through local community newspapers, “non-profit” radio spots, through public transportation advertising, and similar sources. Since direct contact is so important, however, it is very helpful to have a quality video to assist in your program presentation – in our case this was funded by our employer board. It is also of great benefit to have an engaging web site, not only for employers and potential board members who find or can be referred to the site, but also for program clients, other community vendors, etc. In the case of the author’s program, the web site is maintained by an employer board member (an invaluable service). The emphasis, however, is not only on available publicity, but frequent and consistent publicity. Publicity outreach is the next best thing to direct contact and those who hire more frequently, as previously cited [11] are contacted more frequently.

9.) Are there other placement resources that might be utilized in assisting your clients to successful placement? There are a number of helpful resources within many communities that can provide collateral assistance in the placement effort for your clients. If you are not a Project with Industry (PWI) program, your clients who are job-ready may obviously benefit from referral to a Project with Industry (PWI). These are no-cost placement programs funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration for qualified workers with disabilities (see website in- abir.org/members for projects that may be near your location.) Of interest is that a PWI such as the National Telecommuting Institute (NTI) out of Boston (617-787-4426) can be contacted for potential homebased options in any community. As an example, through NTI your veteran client in Mobile, Alabama may work from home by phone as a part-time IRS customer service agent. The state employment service “One-Stop” centers have a number of resources to include computer training, job seeking, skills training, and funding for short-term technical and community college programs (very helpful if there is a waiting list for DVR eligibility in your area). Other vocational rehabilitation programs exist for members of different ethnic minority groups and can still be utilized while working with your vocational rehabilitation program. It is important to leave “no stone unturned” relative to collateral sources for placement assistance. Don’t be limited in your creativity in the use of collateral assistance.

1.1. On an overview, what would be the ultimate goals for a vocational rehabilitation unit in terms of interaction with the community?

In the beginning stages of a vocational rehabilitation program, an immediate goal is to position your clients as frequently as possible in proximity of appropriate employers. This can be accomplished in any manner possible, but examples would include employers providing informational interviews, speaking at job clubs, non-paid job tryouts (215 total hrs.) utilizing the US Department of Labor [7] waivers for people with disabilities (viz., in order to explore a specific job, be assessed relative to abilities, and also be evaluated as to capacity to learn critical job skills), attending job fairs, etc. A parallel goal, however, is integrating your program with the business community to the greatest extent possible. There, ideally, should be no barriers between your vocational rehabilitation agency and the business community both through diverse outreach efforts and actually integrating, in diverse functions, volunteer business representatives and their helpful acumen, within your program. Ultimately, a vocational rehabilitation program wants the business community so comfortable with your program’s competency and ability to provide qualified workers that there is an actual and ongoing employment demand for your program’s clients.
1.2. Summary of recommendations for engaging the business community

1.) Know the general functional capacity and skill base of your clients as they relate to needed and available jobs in the local economy. This will aid in the profiling of your target employers.

2.) Develop an external outreach effort based upon who may be available not only within your vocational unit, but within any contiguous rehabilitation units within your center. Involvement in community organizations, such as Rotary, is critical to contacts with upper management in diverse businesses – in a “nutshell,” all vocational and medical/rehabilitation personnel need to think “placement outcome” both on and off the job. What other community organizations might share your “vocational rehabilitation placement mission”?

3.) Develop an internal presence of business within your program. On a basic level, can employers be brought in to teach job seeking skills, provide informational interviews, or otherwise mentor clients? Over time, can employers assume more of advisory board and fund raising functions, and be involved in other project promotional activities? Can senior or retired business professionals assume volunteer roles that can become invaluable in the promotion of the “placement mission”? How close can your program become to “being one” with the business community?

4.) Be creative in your use of collateral programs with a vocational placement mission in your community that is often inclusive of your clients. This can involve Project with Industries (PWIs), One Stop centers sponsored by the state employment agency, minority group placement projects, etc. The more limited in personnel or funding you are, the greater is the need for creativity in your use of collateral placement resources.

5.) It must be remembered that not only must business be contacted, but contacted frequently in order to be responsive to vocational rehabilitation programs. Ideally, this is some form of consistent direct contact, but mailings, “e-blasts,” newsletters, and other forms of publicity can maintain interest in your clients.

2. Conclusion

The focus of this article is to describe a systematic external and internal framework for developing strong relationships with the business community and improving placement outcomes for your vocational clients. Irrespective of the personnel staffing size of your unit, there are a number of elements of Project With Industry (PWI) program strategies that can be helpful in assisting your clients with disabilities to reach their employment goals and increasing your program placement impact within the community. It is hoped that some of the discussed options and strategies might be helpful in the development or further refinement of your program’s vocational rehabilitation placement mission for qualified job applicants with disabilities.

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References


