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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on approaches designed to strengthen the state-federal vocational rehabilitation partnership with private sector employers. Chapter 1, "Successful Partnerships: The Employer Speaks," is written by business people (businesses listed at the end of the chapter) and addresses the needs of the private sector employers, the structure of corporate employment in large and small companies, how employers prefer to be approached, and employers' perceptions of the value of vocational rehabilitation. Chapter 2, "Successful Partnerships: The Players and the Benefits," provides basic definitions, describes the partners, and outlines service delivery mechanisms to enhance employment outcomes. Chapter 3, "Successful Partnerships: Why They're Essential," provides varying perspectives about partnerships to stimulate thinking about how partnerships can work in local communities. Effective methods for establishing, developing, and maintaining successful partnerships are highlighted in chapter 4, "Successful Partnerships: How To Build Them." Chapter 5, "Successful Partnerships: Speaking the Same Language," is designed to help vocational rehabilitation counselors to speak the language of the industry in order to express needs and goals. The final chapter, "Successful Partnerships: Administrators, Are You Listening?," explains the key role vocational rehabilitation administration plays in the development and maintenance of partnerships with employers. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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Developing Effective Partnerships With Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism

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Report from the Study Group on

Developing Effective Partnerships With Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism

Twenty-Third Institute on Rehabilitation Issues
Washington, DC
June, 1997

Ronald R. Fry, M.S.
Editor

Research and Training Center ***Continuing Education Center***
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Foreword

For nearly 50 years, the Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) has been a national forum for discussing important challenges facing the state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. It is a singular activity where human resource directors, administrators, practitioners, and academicians with expertise in a specific area of VR meet to thoroughly discuss a particular topic. A publication follows that is used in training staff in state VR agencies and community rehabilitation programs, as well as in training university students and service delivery personnel in other VR settings. Participation in the IRI Prime Study Groups is an honor bestowed on individuals who have met the highest standards of professionalism and who are skilled in discussing VR issues and in formulating written documents containing the results of their Prime Study Group assignments.

This particular Prime Study Group document focuses on approaches designed to strengthen the state-federal vocational rehabilitation partnership with private sector employers. It addresses the needs of the private sector employer and discusses employers' perspectives, the structure of corporate employment in large and small companies, how employers prefer to be approached, and employers' perceptions of the value of vocational rehabilitation.

* * *

Finding qualified candidates is no longer as easy as placing an advertisement in the newspaper. The resounding cry from businesses across the country is clearly "We need skilled people!"

VR is in the position to answer that call. Never before has the opportunity to establish effective relationships with businesses been so promising. The largely untapped pool of potential workers with disabilities represents a valuable resource to employers who are desperately seeking qualified candidates. The authors of this document believe this era of prosperity offers more opportunity than simply increasing VR's number of "placements." This document contains recommendations about how to reduce the gap between business and VR and how to create a partnership that meets the needs of all of the customers involved, including people with disabilities, the companies that employ them, and the vocational rehabilitation staff that represent them.

Chapters include *Successful Partnerships: The Employer Speaks!; Successful Partnerships: The Players and the Benefits; Successful Partnerships: Why They're Essential; Successful Partnerships: How To Build Them; Successful Partnerships: Speaking the Same Language;* and, *Successful Partnerships: Administrators, Are You Listening?*

Acknowledgments

Many people and many agencies were involved in the development of this IRI study. The summary of the IRI process that follows will help the reader understand how this involvement in the IRI takes place.

A first step in the IRI process is the selection of topics for the Prime Study Groups to study. We acknowledge the efforts of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), and the many state vocational rehabilitation agency administrators who submitted topics for study consideration.

Following the development of the topic list, the IRI Executive Committee met, discussed, and agreed on three topics for final study. Theirs was a difficult task because all the topics deserved study. We acknowledge and appreciate the work that was done by that committee.

We wish to thank the state vocational rehabilitation agency administrators who nominated individuals to serve on this Prime Study Group. Serving on a study group is a considerable commitment in time and effort, and we appreciate the fact that state administrators allowed their employees time to participate in this group.

Most importantly, we want to thank the members of the Prime Study Group responsible for this document (see page iii). These are the real authors who did the thinking, critiquing, writing (and rewriting) of 100 percent of the content. This publication represents their hard work, which included three meetings of several days each and involved many hours in between those meetings to complete writing assignments.

We also wish to acknowledge the work of the Full Study Group (listed on page v). These individuals took the time to read, discuss, and critique this document. Their feedback was invaluable for further improving the quality of this document.

This editor wishes to personally thank two individuals who, in addition to serving on the Prime Study Group Committee, also agreed to assist me on the Editorial Committee, the last step in finalizing the content of the document. Steve Fusco of the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Peggy Anderson of the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services helped me greatly in putting the "finishing touches" on this document.

Finally, Jean Davis of our Research and Training Center staff composed this document. The attractive appearance of the document you are about to read speaks for her efforts.

Ronald Fry
IRI Study Group Coordinator and Editor

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Chapter I
Successful Partnerships: The Employer Speaks!

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the needs and concerns of businesses who work with vocational rehabilitation (VR). Written by business people (see business list at end), it discusses employers' perspectives, the structure of corporate employment in large and small companies, how employers prefer to be approached, what employers think vocational rehabilitation's value is to them, and more. Each section is followed by a list of straightforward ideas of how to improve relations with employers. We end each section with anecdotal examples from large and small employers that will provide a real life reference point for the VR community.

For the reader's information, the people within companies who handle hiring are referred to in this chapter as *recruiters*, *personnel*, or *human resources*.

"The Times, They Are a Changin'"

The economy of the '90s is booming. Unemployment rates are at all time lows. New jobs are being created every month in the United States. Technology is bringing forth new products and services never before imagined. All seems well in the business world, right?

Not if you are one of the multitudes of companies who need skilled employees to keep up with demand. When unemployment rates sink to five percent, the pool of potential employees begins to become dominated by applicants with minimal job skills and job experience. Finding qualified candidates is no longer as easy as placing an advertisement in the newspaper. The resounding cry from businesses across the country is clearly "We need skilled people!"

VR is in a position to answer that call. Never before has the opportunity to establish effective working relationships with businesses been so promising. The largely untapped pool of potential workers with disabilities represents a valuable and potential resource to those employers who are desperately seeking qualified candidates. But this era of prosperity offers more opportunity than simply increasing VR's number of "placements." This is the time to close the gap between business and VR, to create a partnership that meets the needs of all of the customers involved, including people with disabilities, the companies that employ them, and the vocational rehabilitation staff that represent them.

Employers' Perspectives

Successful Businesses Know Their Business

Businesses exist to make money. Making money in this economy demands staying ahead of competitors and staying in tune with changing technologies. Even the smallest business must be proactive to remain competitive. Companies spend significant time analyzing trends, monitoring production, scrutinizing sales, and evaluating their work force in order to strategically plan their next moves. A company caught off guard is likely to waste valuable time and money to catch up, and it ultimately risks losing customers and market share.

Planning a Company's Work Force Is Where It All Begins

Employees are not just people meeting the requirements of job descriptions; they are the essence of every company. If a company intends to roll out a product in the coming year, it will need:

- people to make the product
- people to design the packaging
- people to analyze the market
- people to devise a marketing plan
- people to market the plan
- people to support those who market it
- people to recruit employees to the company
- people to make the company a desirable place to work
- people to write employees' paychecks

If any one of these people fails in his/her duty listed above, the new product may never make it out the door.

Strategic Plans Must Be Well Conceived and Strictly Followed

Human Resource Departments must look at employment as a big picture. They must understand how many employees will be needed, what skills employees need to have to get the job done, and how much it will cost to recruit and pay employees. In addition, companies must be able to predict turnover and understand the size of the labor pool they have to draw from. Having a computer programming position open doesn't just mean there is a job to be filled, it means there is a department that is not functioning at its fullest potential. A position left open too long could result in lost customers and market share.

Hiring is Vital to the Success of Businesses

Recruiters, hiring managers, and business owners have the responsibility resting on their

shoulders to hire the right person to fill a job in a timely manner. Even entry-level positions wouldn't exist if they were not essential to a company's goals. The pressure of finding the right employee so that no additional nonproductive time is wasted is immense. Hiring personnel must use their time well. Their efforts must be directed at sources that will result in meeting the staffing goals needed for the company's success.

Smaller Businesses Have Less Time and More Pressure

A smaller company often uses personnel to handle several jobs at once. Whereas in a larger company one human resource staff member handles recruiting while another handles benefits, in a smaller company, one person may do it all. Smaller companies have fewer potential employees seeking them out, so hiring personnel must spend more time recruiting workers for those jobs that need to be filled. A smaller company typically has less time for a position to remain open without damaging the company's ability to meet its goals.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership

- **Get involved in the planning stages.** Let companies know how many potential candidates you anticipate having in specific job skill categories over the next year and over the next one to five years. Sit down and plan with them before the needs actually arise. At the same time, employers should share their manpower plans so that VR will understand future needs.

- **Send in your big guns.** To discuss a strategic staffing plan with a company, you'll need to meet with someone who understands the entire hiring goals of the company. In order to demonstrate sensitivity to employer protocol, send someone of equal stature from vocational rehabilitation (director/commissioner to CEO) who can discuss VR as broadly as the company you are meeting with (across counties, in multiple cities, across the state, nationally, etc.).

- **Understand and respect employer's urgency.** An employer's most pressing concern is whether a person can do the job. Tell employers about the applicant's skills, not his/her disability. Discussions about accommodations can come later. Respond quickly to job vacancy announcements or do not respond at all. Slow responses reinforce the idea that government programs cannot keep up.

  Do not send candidates who do not meet the demands of the job. If you send people who do not meet the requirements, you will not be viewed as a viable resource.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

- **Identify a primary VR staff member for each company (or divisions of large companies).** Nothing wastes more time than meeting with, explaining the hiring process to, giving a company tour to, or outlining the job to several different representatives from agencies working with people with disabilities. That time could be better spent interviewing candidates for the job. Employers tend to see VR, private nonprofits, school districts, hospitals, and others who represent people with disabilities as one entity. Coordinate with other agencies in order to avoid the employer's confusion of too many agencies.

- **Spend more time discussing candidates for jobs that are currently open.** Employers do want to discuss future candidates for positions that may become available, but the most pressing need is to fill the positions open now. A recruiter should not spend an hour discussing a candidate for an as-yet-nonexistent mail room position when there are 35 customer service positions open now that need to be filled.

- **Make extensive accommodations the exception rather than the rule.** If you have already helped a recruiter find 10 of the 100 people he/she needs to hire, he/she may have time to work through a particularly intense job restructuring or extensive accommodation for someone with a more severe disability. But if the first time you meet the employer it appears that every candidate you represent is going to require months of accommodation research or job restructuring, you may not be warmly received.

- **Tour the company and keep information about the positions.** If recruiters know that you have seen the company and understand the positions, they will rely on you more as a resource. Once you have toured the company, record the information so that tour time does not need to be taken again.

- **Learn the "culture" of the company.** Companies work hard to establish their images and missions. Company culture includes (a) employee's attire, (b) office decor, (c) the informality/formality with which people communicate, (d) the projects and events companies are involved in (always check out bulletin boards!), (e) signs or messages that employees have on their desks or business cards, etc. Knowing this will help you better understand what type of people would fit into the environment and help you be better prepared to "sell" to the company.

  Let recruiters know that you are interested in understanding the company culture. In addition to descriptions they give you, they may also be able to help you learn more by arranging for you to attend a new employee orientation, giving you background information about how and why the company was started, and getting you involved in other activities that may provide a closer look at the company's culture.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

- **Do not underestimate the importance of human resources**. Attempting to go around human resources can cause bad relations. If you are aware of an open position through someone else in the company, have that person go with you to meet with the human resources representative. Human resource departments are aware of and process every new hire, so there really is no way to circumvent their role.

Following are some examples to help illustrate several different sized companies' employment needs situations:

Company 1 is a mid-sized data servicing company of 2,200 employees. Expansion hiring or replacement hiring requires strict adherence to approval procedures and compliance with a fiscal plan.

Company 1's staffing plans begin in June of the year prior to the fiscal (calendar) year. Staffing plans are the planning documents used to determine hiring needs and fiscal impact of human resources for the coming year. Staffing plans require a sunset review, or rejustification, of all existing positions (based on project revenue, expense, and business volumes). Additionally, they contain a detailed summary of salary-related expenses, capital-related expenses, and business (production/efficiency) justification for all projected new positions.

At Company 1, hiring managers must follow an approval process prior to interviewing, screening, or selecting candidates that is called the "requisition process." It is used to ensure that positions are within budgeted parameters and that there is appropriate business justification for the position. The requisition process is as follows: (a) manager has staffing need, (b) manager completes requisition documentation, (c) Finance Department reviews requisition for budget verification, (d) authorization signatures required through senior management, (e) senior management notifies Personnel of approval/denial. The requisition process can take up to 10 business days.

Due to the elapsed time of the requisition process and because it is Company 1's objective to have skilled personnel in place in an expeditious manner, the Personnel Department needs to have pre-anticipated staffing needs (being familiar with staffing plans, anticipated turnover, etc.) as well as have ready access to a pipeline of skilled job applicants. Hiring for skilled positions can easily be a ratio of 30:1 - applicants reviewed to successful candidate. Beyond resume screening, the personnel specialist is engaged in phone and personal interviewing, background assessment, scheduling

interviews with hiring managers/senior managers, ensuring compliance with appropriate state/federal regulations, making job offers, and setting up new-hire information.

Company 2 is a manufacturing company with approximately 22 employees. It is located in a mid-sized city.

Company 2's hiring is based on job orders. One of their largest customers has seasonal needs, thus Company 2 can accurately predict necessary increases in production and hire seasonal employees through a temporary service in anticipation of that need. Long-term customers that are expanding their operations also cause a need for additional manpower. Usually this labor increase can be anticipated because a customer needs to understand the cost of developing a new product and therefore plans product development in conjunction with Company 2. Large one-time only bids cause Company 2 to utilize temporary services so they are not faced with having to lay employees off once the job is completed. When Company 2 bids on projects, the prices are determined by the amount of manpower needed to create the product in addition to the costs of the materials.

As manufacturers frequently do, Company 2 works on a low profit margin. Thus, when they bid on a job, Company 2 has little room to adjust hourly wages, essential functions, or work schedules. Company 2 also looks for employees that will be able to handle a multitude of tasks, so that they can utilize their employees for the variety of job bids their sales force wins. When Company 2 wins a bid, they are usually rushed to get new employees on board, so they can start producing as quickly as possible.

Approaching Employers

The World of Employment Is Vast

Hiring personnel get sold to, cold-called, checked in with, marketed to, educated about, and asked, "Do you have a moment?" by temporary services, recruiting firms, outplacement centers, church groups, high schools, community colleges, universities, support groups, Chambers of Commerce, unions, social service agencies, governmental programs, etc. Besides all of these calls, there are the employment candidates themselves! Large companies can receive as many as 400 calls per day from a combination of these entities.

Employers Are Protective of Their Time and Marketing Savvy

Recruiters see hundreds of marketing pieces, hear hundreds of sales pitches, and endure all types of sales techniques. Many of these entities may be viable recruiting sources. A recruiter faces

the task of quickly determining which sources seem viable and will be able to help accomplish the goal of filling the positions currently needed by the company. Some of the entities may not be able to assist with positions currently open, but may be helpful later with future jobs. There is a continual balancing act between dealing with immediate need and, at the same time, planning for future positions as they arise.

This can be magnified in a smaller company because the recruiter may handle additional tasks such as purchasing, benefits, payroll, and more. Although the barrage of requests can be overwhelming, recruiters need to stay in touch with community groups and business organizations to understand the labor market and locate sources of potential employees.

Long-Term Relationships

The ideal scenario for hiring personnel is to establish long-lasting relationships with the best organizations in each field (temporary services, recruiting firms, agencies representing people on welfare, agencies representing minority applicants, and agencies representing people with disabilities) so that their time spent establishing new relationships is minimal. A long-term relationship saves time, builds trust, and gives the recruiter a better understanding of what can be expected from that agency or organization.

Networking: A Powerful Tool for Establishing a Relationship

Networking is an important vehicle to finding the best organizations in each field. Most recruiters spend time out in the community at business organization meetings (human resource management associations, small business associations); at community events (volunteering, attending recognition luncheons); at professional support groups (women's groups, young lawyers associations); and more.

Networking is a skill that has to be learned. Many people imagine they will naturally be able to figure out how to network. One key to understanding networking: Do not expect that by attending just one meeting that good leads will be established, but rather attend regularly and allow relationships to build over time. Seeing the same VR counselor every month at the networking breakfast creates a stronger partnership and allows for anticipating needs before they occur. The recruiter can see the VR counselor interacting with people about issues besides the employment of people with disabilities. Through networking, the VR counselor can create the appearance of dependability as well as being knowledgeable. Eventually the VR counselor will become more of a friend and colleague than another sales person trying to sell the recruiter something.

The Word From Above

A note scrawled across a brochure saying, "I met the VR Commissioner at the Capital last week, let's check them out," signed by the president of the company will get some attention. A memo saying, "I saw our competitor on the news last night. What are we doing to get more people

with disabilities on board?" signed by a senior executive gets attention. Going above recruiters to establish relationships can be tricky but effective.

Getting to higher level company personnel increases in difficulty with the size of the company. The stakes at these levels are much higher. The business protocol at these levels is more intense. The expectations are greater. Although even the most powerful CEO of the largest company is still just a human being, these business people are accustomed to being well insulated, dealing with only the big picture and analyzing situations quickly and effectively. A mistake in a meeting with a top executive could damage your ability to work with that company for a long period of time. Minor errors in business protocol are more obvious because less of them ever get through to people at these levels. A note from the CEO saying, "This agency does not know what it is doing" on a recruiter's desk has even more impact than a note saying the reverse.

The best way to approach senior management of a company is with your own senior management. In most cities, executives of similar stature know each other, and at least recognize each other. A meeting (or note or e-mail) between two executives who mutually respect each other will go miles in developing a working partnership.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership

- **Place a high priority on creating professional marketing materials**. There is no time to read long, drawn-out pages of material. Homemade looking brochures send a red flag up about the quality of the agency/company. Materials with spelling, grammatical, or other errors suggest an agency that does not pay attention to details. Consider asking a local public relations firm to donate time to help you create a professional brochure.

  Marketing materials, as the first contact with a business, have the potential to either keep a door open or slam it shut. Good VR marketing materials increase the credibility to an organization. However, marketing materials are needed beyond just opening the door. Once a recruiter has determined he/she is interested in working with your organization, he/she must sell the idea to fellow co-workers, hiring managers, upper management, and other departments. If your marketing materials are good, succinct, and show the most important points of your organization, the recruiter can use them to convince other staff members to work with your organization.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

- **Professionally train your VR personnel in sales skills**. Sales and marketing (even as it relates to employment) is a learned skill. Provide training in cold-calling, sales, networking, and customer service. In the for-profit world, sales people are generally the highest paid people in the company and for good reason. Basically, they bring in the revenue (or in VR, placements). However, sales is a technically difficult position. And, among the thousands of sales people in the world, some are just naturally better than others. VR administrators and supervisors should give their representatives the tools they need to become good sales people and treat them as the revenue generators that they are!

- **Recognize that every contact with a company is marketing and reflects upon the people you represent**. Do not allow correspondence to companies to leave your office without making absolutely sure it is written in a proper format, that its content is concise and it has no spelling or grammatical errors. A counselor who cannot appropriately communicate with a recruiter has very little chance of getting real consideration for his/her VR clients.

- **Become an entity the company can rely on**. If your initial approach to an employer is a brochure and a cover letter that says you will be contacting him/her next week, then contact him/her next week. Follow-up is the most critical part of marketing. Even the smallest commitment ("I'll see you at the Chamber luncheon..."), if not followed through, chips away at your agency's and your salesperson's credibility.

- **Make every contact with a recruiter count**. Respect the recruiter's time, but make sure you are visible to him/her. Send out a marketing piece, follow up on it, set up a meeting, and send a thank you letter. Those four quality contacts may serve to separate you from the many other people approaching the recruiter.

- **Understand that approaching employers also means receiving them**. When recruiters are seeking sources of employees, or they have seen a particularly interesting marketing piece, they may call you. Insist on quality response to all incoming calls because not every employer will identify him/herself as such. First impressions count, even if the receptionist has fielded the 100th call of the day.

- **Avoid gimmick marketing**. Beginning a sales call with "If you hire this person you also get a tax credit" appears to be a gimmick. The time to discuss tax incentives or training cost reimbursements is during a later meeting, not a sales call. Some larger companies find the Work Opportunity Tax Credit unreliable, inconsistent, and too time consuming to be of much value. While smaller companies may appreciate a way to offset the costs of accommodations, it may belittle and stigmatize people with disabilities who do not require accommodations to suggest the government will pay employers to hire them.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

- **Get involved in networking opportunities.** It's the personal touch that makes the difference. Identify networking opportunities and establish a person to regularly attend those functions. Sending a different VR staff member each month devalues the opportunity.

  Participate in networking groups beyond just establishing leads. If you join the Chamber, get involved in subcommittees. If the women's group is holding a fund-raising luncheon, volunteer to be on the planning committee. Just attending is not nearly as effective as getting involved.

- **Evaluate the corporate connections you have in your community.** If you believe meeting with senior-level executives is important to your agency, establish relationships with senior-level executives at companies you work with already. Use your mid-company contacts to get visibility higher in the company. Recruiters appreciate having their names in front of their senior management. Work with them to prepare a summary about the company's increased employment of people with disabilities. Pull senior management into your planning meetings. Send a thank you letter to the CEO commending the work the recruiter has done. While making plans to tour a company, ask if the recruiter will informally take you to meet some of the senior-level managers.

- **Use senior-level VR staff to establish high level relationships.** While your regional manager may not be comfortable meeting with a CEO of a company with 50,000 employees, your commissioner should be. Senior-level VR staff should participate in networking opportunities at senior levels.

- **Match the level of marketer to the level of the person with whom you are meeting.** This is unwritten business protocol. Sending a lower level VR employee suggests you do not respect the position a person holds within his/her company. Besides putting the less experienced person in an awkward position, you are also potentially insulting the person with whom you are meeting.

- **Market to each company individually.** A common mistake made by beginning sales people is to market their product the same way to every company. Understand that companies are interested in hiring people with disabilities for different reasons. A large company may be interested in people with disabilities because they have high demand positions and need additional workers that people with disabilities represent. They may be interested in increasing the diversity of their staff. They may be interested in changing their image in the community. They may be worried about legal positioning. A smaller company may have the same interests, or they may be more concerned about getting assistance in the whole hiring process. There are many different reasons why a company expresses interest in working with a VR employment placement agency, and the VR person needs to tailor the approach to that need.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

While meeting with a recruiter, VR staff should attempt to identify what aspects are most important to that company and use that information to highlight how their agency can assist the company in meeting its goals. Although VR staff may not agree with a company's reasoning, the point is to identify why VR is important to helping the company, not to try and change the company's reasons for being interested. If a company's interest in people with disabilities appears to be for altruistic reasons, their minds will be changed more quickly with a successful placement than with an ideological discussion.

Some additional examples to help illustrate different sized companies' employment needs:

Company 3 is a small business with 15 employees. It is a national distributor located in a medium-sized suburb of a large city. Company 3's hiring is done by the owner. It receives approximately one call and two marketing pieces in the mail per week soliciting placements.

Hiring is difficult for Company 3. The owner of the company feels confident in his entrepreneurial skills, managerial skills, and his knowledge of the market Company 3 is in, but not in human resource skills such as hiring. To alleviate his concerns, Company 3 wanted to find a recruiting source that would do thorough background checks, help him learn to ask the right questions, and locate employees that would stay with the company as it grows larger. Very few of the recruiting sources that contact Company 3's owner emphasize the dependability of their candidates or demonstrate through example the integrity of their candidates.

Company 3 chose a seminary school (that places part time students and their family members) as its main recruiting source. The school has become very familiar with Company 3's business practices and company culture. The owner of Company 3 trusts the school to handle all of the prescreening since it has consistently referred dependable candidates. At this time, Company 3's need for new employees has not increased to the point of needing an additional recruiting source, so the owner generally does not respond to marketing materials and cold calls from other entities.

Company 4 is an international company with approximately 110,000 employees. They have three main recruiting offices with a total human resources staff of approximately 292 people.

Company 4's recruiters are in the business of supporting the other departments of Company 4. The recruiters' performance is measured by their effectiveness in servicing their customers. Among other criteria this includes the length of time a position remains open, the ability of recruiters to locate candidates that meet the hiring department's request, the ratio of interviews to selecting candidates to be referred to the hiring managers, and the selection of candidates referred by the recruiter to the manager. Effective recruiters must maintain resources of qualified potential employees to gain high reviews in these areas. Although Company 4 is a sought after employer and receives thousands of resumes from applicants, the recruiters still frequently use outside recruiting to locate employees.

Each of Company 4's three recruiting offices receives approximately 20 calls from recruiting sources per day. Recruiters independently decide which sources they will work with, knowing the source's effectiveness can influence their own performance ratings. The general characteristics Company 4 seeks in external recruiting sources include national resources, firms specializing in areas of need to Company 4, resources with similar corporate cultures to Company 4, and resources with similar views on the value of diversity to Company 4.

Because of the vast amount of staffing needed to maintain a company of 110,000 employees, recruiters have little time to develop relationships with resources that can only assist them in one geographical location. Also, because of the large amount of staffing, recruiters generally specialize in certain skill areas of the company. Thus working with resources that offer candidates with a broad range of skills requires referrals between recruiters, and it is much more difficult to establish a main contact within the company. Without a main Company 4 contact, external recruiting sources must resell themselves to the company with each contact.

Maintaining Relationships With Companies

Relationships Are the Name of the Game

Long-term and consistent relationships benefit everyone involved. Recruiters save time, know what they are getting, and know what to expect. A VR representative knows the jobs, has open doors to the company, and can sense who will fit into the environment. People with disabilities will be better placed and have more information about the company they are interviewing.

Companies can be more flexible with entities with which they have had long-term relationships. Extensive job restructuring, internships, mentoring, expensive accommodations, and other employment-related activities are easier to fit into a recruiter's schedule when the entity requesting the attention has already proven its ability to help the recruiter meet his/her staffing goals.

Selling a Quality Product

The most important aspect of a relationship between a recruiter and a VR representative is the people referred to the company. A recruiter cannot afford to take the time to establish a relationship with someone who does not provide qualified candidates. No one expects every referral to be hired, but every referral should meet the prerequisites, agree with the salary, and have an interest in working for that company. Recruiters know where they can make exceptions, but any exception should be discussed prior to referral.

A Good Relationship Goes Both Ways

Recruiters appreciate resources that understand their pressure and attempt to help them. With so many different agencies and organizations trying to place people with disabilities in jobs, it is frustrating for the recruiter to hear agencies say they do not have a person who matches a position. It is frustrating to send out job postings to twenty agencies and hear no response. An agency intent on building a good relationship with a company should take the time to contact other resources in search of a potential candidate. Even referrals to other agencies are helpful to a recruiter in desperate need.

Maintaining Relationships Takes Time

It is not feasible that a VR representative will always have people to refer to a company, and it is not acceptable to waste a recruiter's time just "checking in." Maintaining relationships requires developing yourself as a resource of information. Newsletters, fact sheets, and phone calls that discuss other resources for employees, changing employment laws, new training programs, hiring trends, and future employment candidates are useful ways of maintaining contact when there are not potential employees to discuss. Companies thrive on thinking ahead, so any information that helps them plan for the future is always considered valuable.

Being a Resource is More Than Just Knowing Your Own Needs

To truly be of value to a company, a VR employment resource must know itself, know the market and how it fits in, and know the company and how it fits into the community. VR agencies that are still operating as though the employment market is saturated are missing the mark. Bringing up tax credits with a large company who does not utilize them shows a lack of understanding about that company. A recruiter who hears from a VR agency when the recruiter's company is featured in the newspaper that day knows that the agency is paying attention to the company's needs and hangs up the phone with a feeling that the company is important to the agency.

Nurturing Quality Time

High-powered sales people often maintain relationships by treating company representatives to lunches, inviting them to golf tournaments, and giving them sporting event tickets. Although

some employment agencies function this way, company recruiters do not expect this from governmental or nonprofit agencies. The point of having a "marketing budget" is not about buying things, but about "buying" time with the company representative in order to maintain the relationship. Putting VR representatives in a position where they can spend time with a recruiter is far more valuable then having them buy something for the recruiter. Fifteen dollars spent on a VR representative's half of a luncheon with an employer is important because the critical goal is the time spent together.

Business Advisory Committees

In theory, VR business advisory committees would appear to be excellent vehicles to maintaining a relationship with a company. They offer businesses a sense of ownership of an organization, while allowing the VR organization to benefit from the knowledge, networking, and market experience of business people.

In practice, many VR business advisory committees are a waste of an employer's time. Frequently, they are a series of meetings where the agency describes itself in lengthy detail, hands out pages of materials about its program, presents funding systems that are too complicated to comprehend, and then asks for job or donation leads. No real strategic planning is done. No real efforts are made to utilize the expertise of the business people in attendance. No benefit is available to the employer.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership

- **Place a high priority on maintaining relationships**. Coordinate all relations with a company through one VR representative. Allow that representative to become knowledgeable about the entire local employment market, future employment trends, and information that would be valuable to companies. Give that representative time to learn as much as possible about the company. Develop that representative as a resource for the company.

- **Nonsuccessful referrals damage the potential for a long-term relationship with a company**. Pay close attention to the referrals made to companies. What trends can be found in the applicants companies select to hire? What trends are found in the applicants they turn down? Refining your applicant referral process limits the number of potential nonsuccessful referrals made to a company. At any given time, VR should be able to report to a company how many people they have referred, what qualifications those people had, and how many of those people were hired. This information will be valuable in planning for the coming years, in evaluating the value VR presents to a company, and in limiting the potential to damage a relationship with a company.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership (continued)

- **Establish your entity as a resource to employers.** VR representatives should know the employment market, other agencies placing people with disabilities, other employee resources, local training initiatives, employment legislation, and anything else related to employment in the community. This information is useful as a tool for maintaining relationships with employers.

- **Take the time to learn about a company.** Read the literature companies produce about themselves. Go to the library and search for information about the company. Try to understand their industry, their policies, the image they wish to present, and the themes that are important to them. All of these things help maintain relationships and also help determine which applicants might best fit into this company.

- **Develop a marketing budget that buys time with employers.** Lunches, receptions, breakfasts, award banquets, and other social events are all valuable for networking and for maintaining relationships. Mutual experiences solidify relationships. VR counselors should be available to participate in these types of activities.

- **Use business advisory committees wisely.** If you determine that your agency would benefit from the advice of a company, use a business advisory committee carefully. Focus on one area of need (creating a brochure, developing a marketing plan, developing a sales training course, etc.) and ask companies to lend you an employee with expertise in that area. Make the project time limited and goal oriented. Understand that a team of people assembled to devise a sales training course for your staff members does not need to understand your funding system. Devising a plan for obtaining funds would be a separate business advisory committee (more likely a board of directors) from the group focused on the sales training plan.

Some more company illustrations:

Company 5 is a large national company with 70,000 employees. They have 13 recruiting offices around the country with a total of 250 recruiters nationwide.

Company 5 estimates that its recruiting staff participated in approximately 200 Board of Directors and Business Advisory Committees. Most of these groups meet once a month, resulting in Company 5 staff attending approximately 2,400 meetings per year. Because of Company 5's size, they are frequently asked to host these meetings, at which they supply beverages, breakfasts, snacks, meeting space, and so on. Company 5 encourages recruiting staff to get involved in community groups and

allows them to join these groups at their own discretion.

A recent business advisory committee meeting hosted by Company 5 demonstrated their increasing disillusionment with business advisory committees. First of all, the agency who created the business advisory committee did not send a person to host the meeting. In addition, the agency representative who was there was not prepared to serve as host. There was no agenda. Three clients of the agency came with their resumes. The clients asked Company 5 and the other companies present (none of which had jobs in the areas sought) to help them find jobs and/or to give them job leads.

Besides lack of planning and direction, this meeting demonstrates misuse of an employer's time. The Company 5 recruiter does not maintain a list of job leads at other companies. Even if one of the candidates was seeking a job in Company 5, asking an employer to sit through an hour and a half meeting every month to find one employee a job is too much. Although the Company 5 recruiter was able to offer information about improving the resumes that were presented, this could have easily been accomplished through faxing the resume to the recruiter, the recruiter taking five minutes to write comments, and faxing it back to the agency. If the intent was to give the clients an opportunity to talk with employers, this also could have been accomplished by setting up a meeting directly with the recruiter to arrange a practice interview.

Company 5 spent valuable time and money hosting a meeting for which they derived no benefit. While a single meeting of this sort is not troublesome in itself, Company 5 must view this as one of innumerable meetings they will be involved with each year.

Vocational Rehabilitation's Value to Employers

Getting to Know Vocational Rehabilitation

In a time when employers are desperate for qualified job candidates, one might assume that employers would be aware of the largest source of employees with disabilities in our country. They are not! Woefully few employers even know that VR exists. Much of their contact with VR is through private agencies funded by VR. Many do not even know that each state has a vocational rehabilitation agency.

VR holds the most valuable resource for businesses--employees. The days of businesses picking and choosing employees by race, gender, creed, or physical ability are gone. There are just not enough people to fill the jobs in demand. VR's position should no longer be that of asking an employer to consider a new source of employees; it is now a valuable resource with the potential to

alleviate a serious shortage.

Bodies Are Not Enough

Although more employers than ever are offering extensive training (even in the most remedial skills), everyone wants qualified candidates. VR has the ability to design and implement training programs focused on the needs of the business communities. Changes in technology are forcing employers to hire people in positions that have not existed long enough to have established training programs. VR has the ability to be helpful in these areas by developing training programs that supply work-ready employees.

Technical Assistance From Vocational Rehabilitation

Once people with disabilities are hired into a company, case management situations not frequently experienced by employers can arise. Faulty accommodations, accommodative upgrades, transportation problems, and personal assistance issues can completely stump a company's employee support departments. Having VR available to help reduces the need for employers to become experts in case management.

Providing accommodations can be difficult for employers. While some people with disabilities know what accommodations they require and know where to get them, many others do not. Then, once an accommodation is identified, there seems to be no real way of knowing what a fair cost is or what resources are available for purchasing them. VR has the answers! Sometimes, the accommodations employees request seem on the surface to be unreasonable to employers. Here again, VR is a great source to help in these situations. VR can help educate that employer to understand work place realities.

Disability Management

VR can assist companies with overall disability management. Companies do provide many types of formal and informal assistance to their employees. But, in the unfamiliar territories of people with disabilities, these types of assistance can be more difficult to provide. Transferring employees with disabilities, helping spouses with disabilities find employment, and organizing functions to include people with disabilities can all be very difficult with a company's limited knowledge of disability services and accommodations.

These types of services when provided by VR are valuable resources to employers. While assisting with situations not directly related to employment, VR further solidifies its relationship with the company and provides businesses with the confidence they need to offer their employees the best assistance available.

Precepts for Vocational Rehabilitation for Building a Better Partnership

- **Increase awareness of VR.** Some companies do not even know vocational rehabilitation exists. Some see hundreds of different types of organizations serving people with disabilities and do not know where to begin. A considerable marketing campaign to promote VR seems needed.

- **VR is an extremely valuable resource to employers.** Companies need employees. VR holds the largest untapped resource of employees in the country.

- **Companies need assistance with disability management.** One of the underlying issues in hiring people with disabilities is having the confidence to support them like any other employee. VR can help employers make the right decisions on accommodations, handle case management issues, support and promote their employees, and make sure all of the perks of employment are available to their employees with disabilities.

* * *

Note to Readers

Employer input for this chapter was solicited from round table discussion and review of video and marketing surveys from the following:

- Chase Manhattan Bank
- Bell Atlantic
- Blue Cross/Blue Shield
- MBNA Hallmark Information Services
- Employers and members of Dallas Mayor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities
- New Horizon
- Michigan Vocational Rehabilitation employer video
- Employer marketing survey results from the Lewis Group and Georgia State University

Chapter II
Successful Partnerships: The Players and the Benefits

Introduction

This chapter provides basic definitions, describes the partners, and outlines service delivery mechanisms to enhance employment outcomes. It identifies the players in the rehabilitation community and in the employers' world, explains why they are important to the partnership, discusses the contributions of the players, and emphasizes the need for collaboration in the process of developing effective partnerships.

Partnership Fundamentals

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines partnership as "the state of being a partner or an associate or a colleague." It is a cooperative relationship existing between two or more persons associated as joint principals in a business or other enterprise. A partnership implies a close relationship between parties having specific and joint rights and responsibilities in a common enterprise.

The rehabilitation community and the employer community coming together as partners represents an effective and efficient service delivery mechanism. This partnership helps to ensure that individuals with disabilities have the opportunities to become self-sufficient and productive members of our society.

We know from experience that effective partnering between state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and employers results in many benefits for the agency, for the private sector employer, and most importantly, for the individual with a disability. State VR agencies prepare individuals with disabilities for jobs. They need employers to provide the jobs. Employers need dependable and qualified workers. Effective partnerships with employers are critical . . . that's the bottom line.

Effective partnerships are often difficult to achieve due to the different perspectives of the partners. Rehabilitation service providers may lack the knowledge and experience to thoroughly appreciate the world of the employer. Similarly, the employer may not be cognizant of the services and resources available through state VR agencies and other service providers. This lack of familiarity with each other's purposes must be overcome because partnerships are mutually beneficial, cost-effective, and make the effort worthwhile for everyone involved. A purpose of this publication is to serve as a resource in the development and expansion of these partnerships.

A key measure of the success of the vocational rehabilitation program is the extent to which its performance results in (a) satisfied individuals with disabilities and (b) satisfied employers. This point cannot be overstated. Historically, the vocational rehabilitation program has taken great pride in being a highly individualized and consumer-oriented program. The focus of the program has been on the abilities, capacities, interests, and needs of individuals with disabilities. It is essential to balance this effort with a similar focus on employer needs in the competitive marketplace. Given today's challenges to employers to compete in the global economy, equal attention is required of vocational rehabilitation programs to serve both individuals with disabilities and employers.

We must be clear on one point. There is no one person, group of people, agency, organization, employer, or group of employers that has all of the expertise and resources to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain employment. All of the partners are important to the success of the vocational rehabilitation program because of their unique contributions. Partnerships are developed and nurtured through collaboration. Partnerships provide challenging opportunities to utilize resources so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Effective Partnerships

The concept of a private/public sector partnership, when implemented successfully, has tremendous benefits for both the private and the public sectors. When these sectors are working together, business and industry accrue significant savings and obtain a source of needed employees. State rehabilitation agencies and the nonprofit community rehabilitation programs gain assurance of job placement opportunities for people with disabilities.

As noted, the partnership arrangement is often difficult to achieve because of a fundamental lack of understanding stemming from a different base of operations. Frequently, rehabilitation practitioners fail to appreciate the business world and its environment and are sometimes uncomfortable in dealing with business people. Similarly, the business community tends to be unaware of the world of rehabilitation. These differences can be overcome by working together. The partnerships, however, must be mutually beneficial and of sufficient magnitude to make the time and effort worthwhile for all of the participants.

The Key Players

The importance of a partnership with the employer as customer should have the same importance as the consumer as customer. We have to improve our partnership with business and industry. The key players identified in this document are the VR agencies and employers, both large and small, urban and rural. With increased emphasis on employment outcomes, a shift to establish effective partnerships with employers has become a necessity. In the recent past, the public rehabilitation program has included employers on committees and councils, such as business advisory councils, employer advisory committees, committees on employment of people with

disabilities, and state advisory councils for vocational rehabilitation. These committees accomplish many goals with the main emphasis centered on developing effective strategies to achieve successful employment outcomes. Improved communication between the public and private sector, resulting from such committees, assists in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities and the employer customer. Employers learn more about services available to meet their needs and especially about individuals with the skills and abilities to meet their work force demands.

Key players convened at the *1996 National Conference on Effective Employment Strategies for Individuals with Disabilities,* held in Washington, D.C., presented effective practices in developing employer partnerships. The conference was well attended by VR professionals nationally and was considered an excellent forum for sharing proven strategies. It is necessary that such forums continue in order to maximize VR/employer communication opportunities.

Other Important Players

Cooperative arrangements between VR agencies and other public and nonprofit agencies lead to expanded services and resources to assist individuals with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, and retain employment. There are other important players including consumers, counselors or placement specialists, labor unions, trade associations, nonprofit community rehabilitation programs, PWIs, and other employment-related resources.

Consumer/Counselor Partnership

The principal partnership in the vocational rehabilitation process is the consumer/counselor relationship. The basic premise of vocational rehabilitation as a professional discipline is to bring together the consumer and the counselor, ultimately resulting in employment for the consumer. Although the responsibilities in this partnership are equally distributed, the process sometimes requires a shifting of choice as the consumer and the counselor engage in the exchange of information and data. It is the consumer who makes an informed choice as to an outcome; the counselor provides information, guidance, and support whenever necessary. The consumer/counselor partnership is the essence of the vocational rehabilitation process.

Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRP)

When general, complementary, or supplementary agreements exist in the missions of a State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency, Projects With Industry, and Community Rehabilitation Program, and when individuals with disabilities are eligible for services from each of the three entities, partnership arrangements can prevent unnecessary duplication and facilitate an effective and efficient utilization of available public and private resources to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain and retain employment.

The Community Rehabilitation Program plays an important role as a partner in this effort.

The Community Rehabilitation Program is a program that provides or facilitates the provision of vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities to maximize opportunities for employment. CRPs have come a long way in developing working relationships with employers. Either singularly or in cooperation with VR agencies, they provide job development, supported employment, and coaching opportunities for consumers.

Projects With Industry

Projects With Industry (PWI) were officially introduced in the 1968 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act. Business and industry were invited by statutory authority to participate in programs to assist people with disabilities to obtain training and employment in the private competitive marketplace. For the first time in legislation, the concept of a formal partnership was expanded to include private business and industry.

The Projects With Industry partnership often uses the Business Advisory Council (BAC) as a management arm for the partnership as an advisory council. This establishes a substantive link between business and the rehabilitation community. It provides the guidance and counsel to the rehabilitating component, for conduct of a professional program to select and train people with disabilities, and to place those people in jobs. It also adds to the rehabilitation process by incorporating a business milieu including marketing, productivity (placements), cost effectiveness, and quality control. As PWI has expanded over the years, it has broadened its affiliation from a few companies on business advisory councils to many, and has also included entities such as trade associations (e.g., National Restaurant Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Electronic Industries Foundation) in an effort to open the doors of an entire industry or an entire geographic region. This speaks to the importance of establishing multiple partnerships with a variety of employers.

Labor Unions

Another important member of the expanded partnership is organized labor. Unions that make up the labor movement are well-established in their communities as well as nationally and can be supportive of programs that serve people with disabilities. Unions can open doors, promote constructive legislative initiatives that are of common interest, locate job openings, and render other expertise. A closer relationship between organized labor and VR is mutually advantageous and ultimately of benefit to people with disabilities. It is incumbent for the VR community to take the initiative to make these relationships a reality. An organized labor presence on business advisory councils and other advisory bodies adds a broader dimension and fosters more creative and innovative partnerships.

The initiatives of organized labor are now having an impact on job placement and related services through programs directly operated under their auspices. For example, a very active and supportive program is sponsored by the *Center for Administering Rehabilitation and Employment Services (CARES)* of the *International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW)*

and the *Human Resource Development Institute (HRDI)* of the *AFL/CIO*. These labor organizations operate extensive PWI and other employment-related programs for people with disabilities, and both have close relationships with employers and the rehabilitation community.

Educational Institutions

A traditional and long-standing partnership has existed with educational institutions. These may include special education programs; transitional and supported employment programs; and programs with vocational-technical schools, junior colleges, and colleges.

Committees on Employment of People With Disabilities

Vocational rehabilitation has a long history of involvement with committees for employing individuals with disabilities. The most well-known committee is the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. Membership includes employers and participants from various state, federal, and public programs. It provides training on numerous topics of interest to employers, such as the Americans with Disability Act, Accessibility, Family Medical Leave Act, Disability Management, Disability Awareness, Workers' Compensation, and Workforce Diversity. This training is extremely beneficial in developing effective partnerships with employers as well as addressing the myths and stereotypes that have adversely affected the employment of individuals with disabilities.

Benefits of Partnerships

Subsequent chapters of this document will provide the reader with the "how to" in developing partnerships with employers as well as the "why" effective partnerships are important. Some examples of the benefits of partnerships are noted for the reader's benefit.

Consumer Benefits

- Expands and improves employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities
- Improves chances for job retention and career advancement
- Increases consumer confidence in the VR system in relation to employment outcomes
- Improves public awareness of VR as a viable employment resource
- Facilitates more timely, effective, and efficient employment related services
- Results in more satisfied individuals with disabilities because they achieve first class rehabilitation outcomes

Employer Benefits

- Reduces duplication of effort in relationships with employers
- Increases employer knowledge of VR programs

- Provides more opportunities for technical assistance to employers in relation to employee assistance services, job modification, and rehabilitation technology
- Helps to meet employer's need for qualified workers at the workplace
- Improves public awareness of VR as a viable employment resource
- Results in more satisfied customers

Vocational Rehabilitation Benefits

- Expands and improves employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities
- Improves chances to assist individuals to be retained in employment and advance in their careers
- Increases staff knowledge of the employment market
- Helps VR staff obtain or restore confidence in their ability to work with employers
- Increases consumer confidence in VR system in relation to employment outcomes
- Improves public awareness of VR as a viable employment resource

Chapter III
Successful Partnerships: Why They're Essential

Introduction

In this chapter you will read varying perspectives about partnerships. The intent is to stimulate your thinking about how partnerships can work in your local community.

Partnerships: Effective Mechanisms for Business and Vocational Rehabilitation

Detroit lawyer and community volunteer Reginald Turner will spend a year working together with other leaders in Washington, D.C. " I believe I have an important *role to play* in helping make the future of Detroit as bright as its history . . . I understand how much that [partnership] means to the city . . . " (*Crain's Detroit Business*, 1996, p. 24). Mr. Turner speaks to an all-inclusive process that includes parties from diverse backgrounds, with goals and agendas coming together for a specific goal/purpose -- to create a more effective environment that is positive for all entities.

Partnerships are everywhere. The above is an illustration demonstrating how encompassing partnerships can be with business.

We would like to reiterate definitions and examples of partner/partnerships:

Partner: A person associated with another or others in some activity of common interest. A colleague, ally, or associate who cooperates in a venture, occupation or challenge.

Partnership: A relationship, frequently between two parties, in which each has *equal status* and a certain independence but also an implicit or formal obligation to the other or others. A contract entered into by two or more persons in which each agrees to furnish part of the capital and/or labor for a business enterprise.

All of this sounds familiar, yet the rehabilitation community, in many instances, has not taken the opportunity to function as effectively as it might in partnerships. We sometimes work with consumers in a vacuum by creating a product that often fails to recognize the needs of business and industry. We claim to know the needs of the employment community by presenting "the right person for the job—just take our word—trust us." Maybe we need to have an infusion of business into our vocational rehabilitation human services veins!

Partnerships: The Challenge to Vocational Rehabilitation

Much documentation speaks to and supports the need for cooperative partnership. *The Memphis Business*, October 10, 1994, speaks eloquently about teamwork: "Teamwork among

government officials and business leaders is the key to . . . success in industrial recruitment efforts" (Sewell, 1994, p. 33). Richard H. Jacobs, Vice Chairman of Economic Development in Jackson-Madena County Chamber of Commerce says, "We take a team approach that involves everyone in the community. We find out what the company's needs are and we find the people who can meet those needs. We eliminate the red tape and do the leg work" (Sewell, 1994). Perhaps this teamwork approach should become more of rehabilitation agenda.

Partnerships do make a difference. "It was time to sort of put up or shut up," he said. "Get the thing going or take it off the community agenda" (Lane, 1996, p. 28), says Dick De Vos, speaking about partnership of residents, community leaders, and elected officials coming together to build a $76 million arena in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They came together to discuss the issue, determined its importance, and decided how to approach it. They reviewed the benefits and desires of the community.

The message has been stated clearly to the rehabilitation community: "Put up or take it off the community agenda" (Lane, 1996, p. 28). In 1996, we were shaking in our boots, anticipating the "new" federal legislation. How can Americans who have disabilities (approximately 49 million) have an unemployment rate of 69 percent? Critics say that the system has not been responsive. Yet, business cries " We need workers."

Partnership is just simply waiting to happen. What does vocational rehabilitation need to become aware of? Who takes the lead to put things in motion? Should business come forth? How does rehabilitation tear down the barriers that have kept business away? Do we pack it up and go home? Or do we begin to initiate forums where immediate steps are taken to get it done? Business needs and wants to become more aware of the untapped market of people with disabilities who, if prepared, could help meet the global demand for productivity. But, "neither the public nor private sector can carry it out without the cooperation and assistance of the other" (Lane, 1996, p. 28).

We conclude that VR must become more interactive—go where business exists, become committed to business projects, and demonstrate the worth of VR. VR must take the challenge to be a resource to meet business needs. VR will need to become less self-centered and change to a business focus.

Are Employers Willing to Partner With Vocational Rehabilitation?

Is there agreement between employers and rehabilitation agencies about whether a partnership is needed or desired? For rehabilitation professionals it is easy to see the benefit to the program and therefore to assume that it's necessary. But can we assume that employers see the benefit and wish to develop these partnerships?

In a review of pertinent studies, data indicate that employers are positive that persons with disabilities can become good employees (Florian, 1978). Another study stated, "The 418 respondents appear to be favorable to the employability of persons with severe handicaps. They see

those with severe handicaps as dependable, productive workers, and as able to interact with others, especially when provided with appropriate support services" (Levy, Jessop, Rimmerman, Francis, & Levy, 1993, p. 52). In a survey of Projects With Industry Placement Specialists (Greenwood, Schriner, & Johnson, 1991), it was concluded that in addition to viewing persons with disabilities favorably, many employers demonstrate this positive attitude through referral of disabled employees to therapy programs, allowing release time for treatment so the employee can return to the job.

Some employers continue to voice concern over employability, but given their increasingly positive attitudes, it is felt that they will use rehabilitation professionals more often as sufficient trust and confidence in their abilities are established. The development of this relationship could be "the entree to the development of partnerships where resistance can be overcome, and an array of services can be provided to benefit both workers with disabilities and employers" (Greenwood et al., 1991, p. 25).

The Paradigm Shift From Selling to Marketing

Clearly then, development of partnerships is something employers would view as beneficial. Perhaps the most significant efforts by the rehabilitation community to establish more effective relationships with employers has been the incorporation of marketing concepts into the VR system. In the early 1980s significant activities were undertaken by rehabilitation agencies to energize the placement process by undertaking a marketing approach. Instead of a counselor attempting to place a client with an employer, rehabilitation agencies began to develop coordinated approaches to identifying employers' workforce and other disability-related issues and then attempting to meet those needs. Thus, a distinction was made between *selling* and *marketing*.

> Selling is generally concerned with trying to get the consumer to exchange what he has (money or employment) for what the seller has (goods, services, or clients). Marketing, on the other hand, is concerned with trying to <u>have</u> what the consumer wants. (Corthell & Boone, 1982, p. 8)

As early as 1982, employers were viewed as "customers" and clients were identified as the "product" being marketed by the rehabilitation agency (Corthell & Boone, 1982, p. 2).

> Despite the change in thinking, placement activities continued to be viewed by many counselors as unpleasant . . . unpleasant because counselors felt that they were unprepared, poorly trained, uncomfortable and often times burdened with a large caseload. And "although the Rehabilitation Act, federal regulatory guidelines, and RSA's objectives reflect a strong placement emphasis, placement/job development is not viewed broadly enough in most quarters to encourage services to employers . . . By seriously serving the business/industrial sector public rehabilitation becomes a partner that is looked to and relied on in matters of disability management, VR becomes, in turn, more viable in enhancing the productivity of disabled individuals." (Molinaro & Walls, 1987, p. 46)

The concept of viewing the employer (business) as a customer continues to expand. No longer is securing a placement the only intent of the VR effort. Yet, there is recognition that all of this is rhetoric until it is accompanied by resources. Marketing is geared not only to meeting the employer's work force needs but addressing their other needs as well:

> In the old paradigm, rehabilitation asks of business, "Will you take my client?" In the new paradigm, rehabilitation asks of business, "How can we help you be more productive?" This marketing approach recognizes that people seek to gain solutions to problems rather than to buy things. (Corthell & Boone, 1982)

In the old paradigm, rehabilitation is preoccupied with the clinical model and productivity of persons with disabilities. In the new paradigm, enhanced business productivity through prevention and disability management becomes a major part of that concern (Molinaro & Walls, 1987, p. 48).

Benefits of the Partnership

Over the years, the VR system has spent significant time and effort evaluating its ongoing relationship and partnering with clients. Such studies have suggested methods to enhance the success of those partnerships. As a result, the VR system has had considerable experience in fine tuning this type of relationship, but the same is not necessarily true for those relationships developed with employers. The concepts are the same, however, and much can be learned from the efforts that have gone into strengthening the client/counselor relationship. What is true for that relationship is no less true for the VR/employer relationship. As in any partnership, success can be achieved only if there is meaningful benefit to each party. "What does appear necessary for a successful partnership is for both parties to make sustained, meaningful, and valued contributions to the enterprise that reflects their interests and strengths" (Corthell & Van Boskirk, 1988, p. 12).

Since the rehabilitation agency is providing a product and the employer is the consumer of this product, a successful partnership will enhance service to both customers of the VR system. For VR agencies, the benefits of a successful partnership will include assurance that for those individuals with disabilities being served, opportunities for achieving employment will be increased. Enhancement of the quality of the employment opportunities being made available to people with disabilities will also occur.

For employers, the most obvious benefit is economic. By employing qualified and motivated individuals, there will be a positive impact on the company's economic success. And although it is safe to assume that economic success is the result that most often comes to mind and is probably viewed by employers as the most significant, economic benefit is not the only reason employers hire individuals with disabilities. A survey by Greenwood, et al. (1991) of employers cited the ability to comply with legal requirements, ability to report to others that the employer has employees with disabilities in the organization, and the self-satisfaction realized from employment of workers with disabilities as important incentives as well. Employers benefit by:

- Reduced turnover
- More qualified workers
- Consistent productivity
- Economic incentives
- Diversified work force
- Recognition by the host community
- Legal compliance
- Resources to assist with work force retention
- Prepared workers to meet future needs

The business community is well aware of the attitude of others that corporations are cold and calculating. The opportunity to dispel some of this concept, while securing qualified employees through partnerships with the rehabilitation community, is a real and valuable long-term goal for employers. In turn, employee morale is likely to be positively affected by the knowledge that one's company is aware of its responsibilities to individuals with disabilities. The hiring of individuals with disabilities also enriches a company's culture through added diversity. And though somewhat more difficult to calculate, the ability of persons with disabilities to earn a wage reduces social service demands and has an indirect but positive effect on business taxes.

This is not to suggest that noneconomic incentives are disingenuous. Rather, they should be seen as enhancements to the economic benefits that accrue to the employer from its partnership with rehabilitation.

From the rehabilitation side there are also long-term benefits that accrue from the partnership with employers:

- More and better quality placements for individuals with disabilities
- Better utilization of staff
- More efficient use of financial resources
- Better long-range planning for future or anticipated vacancies
- Better strategies to better serve the employer customer
- Greater effectiveness in identifying and addressing employer needs
- Bias stereotype will decrease as a result of the partnership

Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Employers in the Partnership

Much has been written about VR services provided to employers, but warrants repeating since success in providing these services is at the very heart of developing and strengthening this partnership. An excellent review of these services was outlined in the document produced by the Ninth Institute on Rehabilitation Issues entitled *Marketing: An Approach to Placement* (Corthell & Boone, 1982). With minor modifications to reflect some of the changes in law and updated terminology, they are summarized below:

Recruitment Services - The provision of qualified, skilled applicants who have been pre-screened to match the needs of the employer. To provide this service effectively and thus strengthen the partnership, the VR program must be familiar with the employer's personnel practices, the company's overall operations (for example, what product do they produce, etc.), and the individual job requirements.

Financial Incentives - Providing information about and assistance in securing financial incentives available for hiring individuals with disabilities such as on-the-job training programs, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, Projects With Industry, etc.

Consultant Services - There is a wide array of consultant services that VR offers the employer customer such as implementation of workplace accommodations, job site and task analysis, ADA consultation, disability awareness and sensitivity training, job restructuring, refining job descriptions, and the impact of the Family Medical Leave Act on other disability related legislation.

Disability Management

A very specific service for which employers have developed a greater awareness of need is disability management. Because of its potential to affect so significantly the partnership, it warrants somewhat more in depth discussion. Disability management, as a VR consultant service to employers, is increasingly cited as an effective means to meet the needs of the players in the rehabilitation process. The IRI study on disability management (Rice & Van Hooser, 1989) concluded that the social goals of VR agencies, the business goals of employers, and the economic goals of persons with disabilities can all be achieved through creative partnerships stimulated by VR agencies addressing their employer-customers' disability management needs (Rice & Van Hooser, 1993, p. 34). Disability management services tend to be delivered on an "as needed" basis. The VR person is an outside expert who provides the service and then moves on until needed again. The impact to the employer's goals is obvious for these types of interventions by rehabilitation personnel.

It has been noted that as increased emphasis has been placed on the VR system to function as a customer-driven program based on customer satisfaction, disability management is cited as one example of the potential collaborative relationship between VR and its employer-customer (Rice & Van Hooser, 1993, p.33).

Employers in the past were reluctant to become involved in problems of workers with disabilities because there was little business advantage in doing so. Economic and social changes, such as rising medical costs associated with disability, and foreign competition have forced employers to take another look at how they deal with employees who become disabled. They have become interested in actively managing employee disability issues as a necessary part of effectively running their businesses: "Many companies are now beginning to realize that they must be concerned with HOW to implement a disability management program, not WHETHER to implement one . . . There seems to be significant room for rehabilitation professionals to suggest and assist with

program services on prevention and intervention levels" (Gottlieb, Vandergoot, & Lutsky, 1991, p. 25).

Employers continue to have problems finding "good" employees—persons who are dependable, reliable, cooperative with co-workers and supervisors, and work in teams. Enlightened employers are seeking a previously untapped population of workers, i.e., people with disabilities. As the VR system assists employers to meet this need, further opportunity is afforded to enhance and strengthen its relationships with the business community: "Fulfilling this need for external experts is precisely what the rehabilitation community can offer. Mutually beneficial relationships can be built if rehabilitation professionals market themselves to answer this need by tailoring services specifically for company programs" (Gottlieb et al., 1991, p. 27).

The effective delivery of disability management services to employers may include assistance with providing services to workers with disabilities, managing cases, giving advice regarding technology, setting up return-to-work alternatives, assisting with reasonable accommodations, and setting up information systems to monitor program effectiveness and cost/benefit. The service must be based upon the specific needs of the individual employer. Just as VR agencies design plans uniquely for clients when delivering a service, so too must the VR agency design its service to employers based on the unique characteristics of the company and its culture. "Just as individual consumers have varying needs, so do businesses: services need to be tailored for employer disability management programs based on an assessment of their individual situations" (Gottlieb et al., 1991, p.27).

The importance of sustained and continuous support beyond a 90-day closure to the employer cannot be overlooked in delivering such services. The ability of the VR system to provide consultation to the employer to deal with adjustment issues of the newly placed employee, or disability awareness/sensitivity training for other employees, or problems that might arise in supervision, or any of the other questions that employers might have, must be provided in a timely manner and by knowledgeable staff. It too can have a direct impact on the employer's ultimate goal. "The result of support services can be lower cost to maintain employees and multiplies in savings from a lower turnover rate" (Corthell & Boone, 1982, p. 58).

Elements of a Successful Partnership

In addition to being a business relationship, the partnership is also an interpersonal relationship. The success of the relationship is based not only on the partners identifying the benefits each may provide to the other but also on the ability of the partners to relate to each other on a personal level. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary for each of the partners to learn and understand something about the world in which the other lives and works.

1. **Understand needs and respond promptly**. A model partnership blossoms when all parties understand the importance of long-term relationship building and become active in each other's annual plan development.

For rehabilitation professionals this requires that they understand the needs, values, and expectations of the business community. The ability to deliver a service or products (oftentimes in minutes) in a timely and dependable fashion is a highly prized value in the business community. Unless rehabilitation professionals recognize and respond to values such as these, they will not develop the level of trust and credibility that is necessary to maintain a sound partnership with employers.

2. **Develop respect**. To strengthen these partnerships, it will be necessary to develop a mutual respect for each other as professionals. This respect must be based on honesty in dealing with each other, working together to develop mutually advantageous strategies to achieve each partner's goals, and developing effective communication that will ensure the understanding of each other's needs and values.

3. **Enhance communications through feedback**. Communication and ongoing feedback are essential components for each partner to understand the other's needs and values. A recent article in the *Journal of Rehabilitation* (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995) notes that without adequate feedback, perceptions that are different would not be apparent to the partners. For example, employers evaluate the effectiveness of service based "not only on the performance of the individual employee, but on such factors as agency responsiveness, attitudes, and willingness to problem solve" (p. 43). Yet few rehabilitation agencies have standards for "measuring performance effectiveness except in terms of the job performance of the individual worker. . ." (p. 43). The focus of the rehabilitation agency has been more of a narrow internal focus on process rather than an assessment of employer satisfaction.

   Additionally, the authors found that when questioned regarding barriers to development of collaborative partnerships, rehabilitation personnel tended "to cite factors that are less amenable to remedy than did employers" (p. 45), e.g., the economy, the labor market, etc. Employers' responses were related "to rehabilitation service factors that could be changed or improved such as follow-up, knowledge of business needs, and so forth" (p. 45).

The results of this study tend to support the conclusion that indeed the values and perceptions of employers and rehabilitation professionals may be quite dissimilar. It also tends to support the conclusion that when the VR agency fails to secure the feedback necessary to distinguish these differences, a significant barrier will be created to maintaining effective relationships with employers.

Elevating the Employer's Position as Partner

The ultimate goal of the employer/rehabilitation relationship is to establish and maintain a mutually beneficial partnership. Therefore, VR must develop procedures for measuring employer satisfaction with services provided. If these services are not monitored, there is little to suggest that

expectation will result. Where there is exchange of something of value for each party, the partnership is characterized by trust.

For rehabilitation professionals this simply means approaching employers as we would approach other partners in the rehabilitation process. However, this has not always been the case. Despite the creation of employer accounts, numerous hours of placement training, the development of job banks, etc., the majority of resources is still directed toward the individual client rather than the employer: "Although the Rehabilitation Act, federal regulatory guidelines, and RSA's objectives reflect a strong placement emphasis, placement/job development is not viewed broadly enough in most quarters to encourage services to employers" (Molinaro & Walls, 1987, p. 46).

Certainly the efforts VR agencies have made in the shift to "marketing" versus "selling" its product has helped to establish the groundwork in establishing a more professional relationship with employers. There has been a shift from process issues to employment outcomes, and efforts have been made by the VR system to treat employers as customers along with a genuine attempt to understand their world. This has led to many partnerships between the business and rehabilitation community. However, if we are to strengthen those partnerships already established and ensure the continued development of such relationships, then the VR system must attempt new ways to approach its interactions with business. Molinaro and Walls (1987) suggest that agencies demonstrate their seriousness of intent to serve employers by applying some of the same client-centered principles when offering services to employers. For example:

1. Maintain current employer case files

2. Reserve time at staff meetings for discussion of employers

3. Include employers in the agency mission statement

4. Reward staff for working with employers

5. Measure success in serving employers

6. Clearly recognize the employer's need for *qualified* workers

This last point cannot be emphasized enough. VR should not overemphasize disabilities, but should focus on the needs of the employer. VR should ensure that candidates possess the qualifications to perform the job duties.

While the list of principles is relatively short, each principle demonstrates the level of importance to which the employer-customer relationship must be raised with the business community if the relationship is to be truly professional and effective.

The Need for Partnering

All we need to do is get a grip and move ahead. We should no longer fool ourselves by believing that we can make the economy progress without solving others' problems--such as our crumbling infrastructure, our deteriorating education system, and a governing system that people believe is unresponsive to their needs. All these problems are intertwined and must be addressed. People must sit down together and work out differences.

If VR can follow this simple principle, the results will mean more stability, more circulating dollars in the local community, a competitive business community with profits for all to share, more and better employment outcomes, and responsive companies that ultimately are recognized through effective dialogue and open joint planning.

And last, it will afford persons with disabilities a real opportunity to be contributing tax-paying members of society with real and meaningful employment, a win-win situation for all.

Chapter IV
Successful Partnerships: How To Build Them

Introduction

This document thus far has:

- Identified what the employer is looking for in a partnership,
- Defined a successful partnership, and
- Defined why a successful partnership is mutually beneficial.

It is now time to identify successful methodology. This chapter will highlight a number of effective methods. In addition, the following five steps critical to the establishment, development and maintenance of successful partnerships with employers will be discussed.

These five steps are:

1. The account system
2. Doing your homework
3. Appointment preparation
4. Relationship building
5. Relationship maintenance

This chapter will also identify the who's, where's, and how's in the process of developing successful partnerships with employers. This information is presented with the understanding that the following beliefs and assumptions should be in place.

- It is important for the entire public VR program to actively embrace the idea of partnering with employers as a means to greater employment for individuals with disabilities.
- It is important for the VR program to identify the employer as a customer who needs to be served with the same passion and purpose as all other clientele.
- It is important that the VR program understands that a successful partnership will provide

long-term benefits to the employer, the consumer, and the VR program.

- It is important to understand that a successful partnership requires commitment, dedication, nurturance, and diligence in order to remain successful and fruitful beyond the point of placement.

- It is important to recognize that because a successful partnership is constantly evolving, flexibility is a necessary tool in the VR staff toolbox.

Information from various surveys and other sources strongly suggests that employers lack adequate information about VR services. Therefore, VR must improve its communication to/with employers by utilizing more effective marketing and networking strategies. VR needs to position itself as a disability management resource to the human resources function. VR must understand that business and industry needs are constantly changing; and if VR truly values employers as customers, we, too, must change to help meet those needs. Companies prosper when they meet consumer needs successfully, but fail when they do not.

Finally, and even as VR systems are dealing with the old adage of "doing more with less," it is still imperative that the commitment to establishing successful partnerships with employers be evident at every level of the public rehabilitation program. This commitment is necessary if VR is to succeed and prosper. VR staff must receive the necessary tools such as training, adequate budgets, technology (including computers), marketing materials, specialized staff, Internet access, fax machines, and appropriate software in order to interact with the employer/customer. Doing these things will elevate VR's value to employers as a valuable resource.

Steps in Developing and Maintaining Successful Partnerships With Employers

Step One: Develop an Employer Account System

The development of an employer account system is the first step in recognizing the employer as a customer in need of development, maintenance, and care. The employer should be given the same treatment as other VR service recipients. The employer is given a case file containing all pertinent information about VR needed to develop, maintain, and grow the partnership. It is important that this information is easily accessible and continually upgraded. This upgrading will ensure timely and accurate service, while demonstrating VR's attitude toward the employer's importance in the partnership.

Ingredients to the employer account start with the account representative and contains all relevant information. Continually updated, this includes information about the following:

- **Account representative.** The account representative operates as the primary conduit of

information between the VR system and the employer. Any changes in the plan or additional moves not dictated by the employer account should be cleared with the account representative. Changing account representatives requires the same transfer of information as the changing of a consumer's VR counselor.

- **Services provided**. A listing of *all* services provided is important. The VR staff needs to include all services that will help grow the partnership. A successful partnership is based on more than a few placements. VR provides significant information and expertise that can benefit the employer. ADA and Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) information, sensitivity training, reasonable accommodations and other human resource functions as they relate to disabilities are knowledges that the VR staff can share with employers who can benefit from this expertise found within the VR system.

- **Positions within the company**. A listing of all positions within a company will help consumers prepare for employment in the future. This information will also help VR staff counsel consumers about potential openings.

- **Demographics of employees**. Employee demographics gives the VR staff and consumer a quick look at the type of individual being hired by the company. This information will help prepare the VR staff to understand the culture of the company. This understanding may also be helpful as the VR staff offers additional services and consultations. Recommendations about training and consultations should be offered only when the partnership is solid and secure.

- **Names of VR clients hired with the employer**. Names of past employees with disabilities, referred previously by VR, serve as a demonstration of value when the client was successful and a demonstration of what to avoid when the client was not successful. Past hires may also be able to serve as references for clients or provide first-hand information about the company and its culture. The willingness to learn by VR may be as valuable to the employer as a history of success.

- **Salaries and benefits offered**. A simple listing of all benefits and salaries will help in the referral process. This information is valuable as employment opportunities are compared.

- **Capacity to post or share job listings/vacancies with staff statewide**. The ability to post and share vacancies with other offices throughout the state demonstrates your willingness to serve the employer's best interest. Additionally, VR represents a national resource. Sharing listings with VR agencies from other states serves to enhance the VR viability to the employer.

- **Point of contact information**. The names of all employer contact people, their positions, phone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses, and other relevant data will

help keep the company accessible for future correspondences.

- **Follow-up data.** A system established to remind VR staff about necessary correspondence and follow-up activities demonstrates organization and follow-through to the employer. Included in this section should be a narrative regarding employer conversations requiring follow-up or response.

- **General information.** A section listing personal data that may help break the ice in future conversations is extremely helpful. Sales people often note personal information that they go back to for use in future conversations. Hobbies, interests, family information, difficult situations, and successes will demonstrate to the employer that the account representative is listening and interested. It is also valuable to save any relevant articles from newspapers, magazines, or other sources that may be useful for future reference and that demonstrate knowledge of the company.

The Employer Account System is an excellent tool for maintaining and growing a successful partnership with employers. A well-maintained and upgraded system will serve as a valuable marketing tool for future services and client information. Employers have stated that maintaining accurate, timely, and efficient contact is essential to a lasting relationship. A successful partnership requires an organized approach, with upgraded data used effectively.

Step Two: Do Your Homework

Like any successful partnership, the ability to efficiently take advantage of opportunities can make or break future growth. Knowing whom to contact, where to get information, where and how to make contact are all pieces of information that require diligent study and careful planning. Although some relationships do begin by being in the right place at the right time, it is more likely that an organized approach will minimize errors and maximize potential. A well-organized approach by VR staff provides the employer/customer with the respect and dignity expected from all vendors.

Employers will quickly change vendors when not satisfied with services or products. A successful Employer Account System, combined with a creative approach and sufficient time spent planning, gives the partnership maximum opportunity to become successful and long lasting. Homework is essential in developing a partnership, and it is also the primary ingredient in maintaining a successful partnership.

Where to get information. The search for information takes as many routes as there are employers. Some of the more useful approaches are the following:

- Word of mouth remains a valuable method to learn about a particular employer. Although greater detail will be provided later, it is important not to underestimate the value of family, friends, and the social circle in regard to a particular employer.

- The media are constant and reliable sources for updating knowledge about a specific employer. Newspapers, news reports, and business periodicals are often filled with information regarding employers. Information about the business or the industry may prove as valuable as specific employer information. While scanning text and airwaves, make sure to be aware of trends that may be door openers or partnership enhancers.

- Trade organizations and journals are always valuable in retrieving information that will demonstrate to the employer that the VR staff is willing to learn in order to make the partnership a success.

- Business organizations have been and continue to be a great source for information regarding the local business scene. The Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Clubs are common watering holes for business people, and a well-chosen membership could help to establish successful partnerships. But be selective; in urban areas there are many organizations that bring employers together, but the cost of joining can be prohibitive.

- Businesses produce marketing materials to identify and promote products, services, and mission. Brochures, data sheets, business plans, strategic plans, and, most importantly, annual reports can provide valuable information that can help identify a company's culture, style, and points of importance. An annual report can provide financial information, numbers of employees, organizational charts, and more. The annual report is more than a marketing document; it is an actual report of the previous year's success and growth.

- Last, and certainly not least, technology provides the greatest search mechanism in history. The Internet can provide information regarding larger employers directly, and information about specific industries and types of businesses. Time spent searching the *net* may be the most efficient use of search time if the operator is knowledgeable regarding search engines and search techniques. Most large companies have a Web Page, which is really not any different than a press release. If this knowledge is not readily available in the VR office, training and/or hiring needs to upgrade this skill.

Knowing where to find the information is useful only if it is plugged into a carefully designed plan of approach. This plan for locating information is a guide, but should not be considered an end to the information search. Creativity with that information is important, and the search method can be as varied as the employers.

Now that we have located our start-up information, what should we do with it? A well-organized plan will provide greater opportunity for success than a happenstance approach.

Who to contact. Knowing who to contact is as important as any other piece of the puzzle. Generally, the highest point of equal contact will provide the greatest chance for a successful partnership to develop. Highest point of equal contact means that the greatest chance for success

occurs when the top ranking official for the employer initially meets with the highest ranking official from the VR office. This contact should not be expected to develop the details (matching clients to openings, setting up the training, providing specific expertise); however, the word of the boss generally provides the direction for others to follow through. The more chains of command that need to be cleared after the point of contact, the more opportunity is there for miscommunication. The president of the company is not always available, but the homework may reveal which executive is most creative and therefore open to new forms of growth.

When dealing with multi-location employers, a VR representative who has a position of statewide prominence may aid VR in making this partnership a success. When dealing with smaller employers, homework might focus on which partner, manager, or company owner is most willing and interested in trying new forms of growth. Once identified, the small company representative deserves the same respect as the multi-national representative. The reward may be small initially but should pay off in the future. Remember that employer-to-employer contact is the best introduction available, so treat even the smallest Mom and Pop business with the understanding that it receives the same attention as does the largest employer in town.

Where to make contact. Knowing where to contact a specific employer may prove as valuable as what to say or who to approach. An employer may not like to mix business with pleasure. Therefore, approaching him/her at your son's little league game may prove more harmful than beneficial. The opposite may also be true; that is, a specific employer might be more comfortable out of the office and therefore more willing to provide the VR staff undivided attention at the same little league game. Generally this information is available through word of mouth or from somebody who knows the employer directly. Do not underestimate the value of the employer's office staff or office manager. Especially in larger companies, knowing people in these positions is important because they know what makes the boss tick or how to influence decisions. They are often asked these types of questions and are pleased if their information is helpful. The secondary gain is that by asking office staff, this may serve to pull them into the process, and the more insiders involved, the better.

Carefully ask if the decision maker is more prone to make decisions over dinner, at the golf course, or in the office. Does she/he prefer early morning or late afternoon? These questions will give the VR account representative information that will be helpful in making the partnership successful.

How to make contact. The better prepared you are for the first contact, the better the chance for success. Once you have determined who to speak with and where to speak with him her, it is important to plan how you would like this first contact to proceed. Carefully decide whether the first contact should be made in person, by phone, by fax, by mail, or with a sponsor. Each choice has its benefits and drawbacks. This is a good time to pull in the VR office team to consult on this crucial decision, but the final decision should be made by the account representative, thus giving him her the ownership needed to push success.

It is beneficial to go through a trial run on the first contact. A mock phone call, a choreographed visit, or a sample letter allows the account representative to experiment and go into the first contact with more confidence and surety. It is helpful to conduct ongoing training to the VR staff regarding which practices work, why, and which did not. This internal training will not only create a more cohesive team, but it will help minimize mistakes down the road (i.e., the employer calls with an emergency while the account representative is on vacation, but a knowledgeable co-worker can fill in for him/her). Training that points out the nuances of success will create a better partner, both top-to-bottom and side-to-side. Finally, attempt to find the common ground that will serve as a starting point or safety net in future negotiations or conversations.

The above listed methods represent an array of methods demonstrated in the research stage of successful partnerships but by no means represent a complete list. Continually expand the base of knowledge by searching for new and better ways to glean information and approach techniques.

Step Three: Appointment Preparation

Having completed all homework and collected all data, the next step becomes one of preparation. Preparing questions for the initial contact can help the account representative to become comfortable with the development of a partnership. Preparation can take any number of forms but should always include rehearsal. Rehearsal can come in the form of a mock meeting or maybe a taped session using a simple tape player. Practicing one's dialogue will make the VR person more comfortable, allowing for quicker growth than what might result from a hastily prepared presentation. Subtleties such as eye contact, body language, intonation, confidence and appearance may serve to make the VR staff more comfortable, which in turn will make the employer more comfortable and result in a greater opportunity for success.

Carefully deciding how to use the information gleaned in the homework phase, where it is appropriate and when it is most beneficial, generally requires some planning and forethought. Too much preparation is a dangerous practice if it results in an overly choreographed first meeting, but it can help to eliminate any discomfort and minimize surprises.

Step Four: Build the Relationship

All successful relationships go two ways. The relationship between employer and VR can be mutually beneficial if both partners understand their role and what the other will receive from that process. Like any positive relationship, it will take a sincere commitment in order to maintain and grow. It will likely be filled with ups, downs, ebbs, flows, and perhaps even some surprises.

In order for the relationship to grow, it will need careful nurturing. The VR professional will need to enlist the same talent, skill, and commitment required for working with people with disabilities. The employer relationship will succeed only if it is afforded this level of commitment.

The initial contact. The beginning stages of a partnerships are crucial. While it is common

for the initial contact to take place via phone or letter, it is important that a face-to-face meeting take place as soon as reasonably possible. A person-to-person setting allows for the necessary understanding of body language and facial interpretation that cannot be attained by phone or letter. The face-to-face setting also gives the VR person the opportunity to assess the company's environment. The environment will help to educate the VR professional about any negative or positive nuances of the employer that may not show up in the literature or previous research. This information can be extremely valuable as one tries to establish some common ground with the employer. As the VR professional studies the office environment, he/she can learn points important for the relationship. It provides the opportunity to learn what the employer considers important. His/her family pictures, interests, and/or hobbies may be displayed on the walls, in the bookcases, or on the desk. The VR professional will be looking for a common point, comfortable and safe, and which can be referred to at any time in the relationship. If the VR professional and the employer share a common interest (fishing, age of children, an author, sports, medical happenings) this information can be used from that point on. One can relate to those common elements throughout the discussion. As the VR representative asks about the poster on the wall, the book in the case, the trophy on the shelf, or the picture on the desk, the common ground becomes an important connection between the employer and VR staff. However, experienced professionals make sure that the discussion does not interrupt the proceeding or become counter productive.

State your purpose. It is important to clearly state your purpose early in the process so that misunderstandings do not develop. The employer needs to clearly understand what the VR staff expects to receive from the relationship. It is also important that your purpose is general enough to leave room for flexibility and growth. Although flexibility will help build and maintain the partnership, clarity and minimal room for misinterpretation will build the relationship on solid ground. Avoid terms that can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is important to *say what you mean and mean what you say*. One never knows how someone will interpret information, so be as clear as possible. A misinterpretation in the beginning of the partnership can cause significant damage at a later point.

Listen. The VR staff must clearly understand what the employer needs in order to make the partnership a success. After making your purpose clearly, listen to exactly what the employer wants. It is important to the employer that communication is clear and understood, for a mistake in communication can cause financial and emotional distress down the road. Misinterpretations are possible from all sides, so make sure there is clarity at all points. Ask as many questions as it takes to understand. It may feel like you are overdoing this, but an employer will ultimately respect your desire to build the relationship on solid ground.

If you still believe that too many questions may be counterproductive, then you will need to find an alternate method to get those important questions answered. The only "bad" question in this case is an unanswered one. An unanswered question may come back to haunt you later in the process. Remember that the employer does not expect that you automatically know all there is to know about the business but does expect that you will take the partnership seriously enough to understand the work to which you are bringing potential employees.

Respect differences. A common pitfall to many partnerships lies in either side attempting to re-educate or to change the mind of the other side too early in the process. Each side needs to learn the environment, culture, and practices of the other before attempting to educate. The employer is not looking for someone to come in and change his/her company. The employer is looking for a resource to support his/her culture and environment. It is important to understand that the employer may not be at the same level of disability awareness and sensitivity as the VR staff. The employer may make statements that upset or even insult the VR staff, but change will come only if a positive relationship or trust is established first. The VR staff must understand that these statements are rarely intended as insults, but if they are, then maybe this is not the best employment match for the job candidate. It is important to remember that the VR person may make similar language mistakes when attempting to discuss the employer's area of expertise.

The VR counselor will need to build and maintain a relationship of trust and mutual respect, which will allow him/her to go back and correct any misperceptions at a later time, as opposed to correcting the employer at a time when trust has not yet been established. It is wise to win an employer over before correcting or competing about language or other general information.

Strategic risk taking. Having established a partnership based on trust and mutual benefit, the more difficult work begins. It is important to take risks in the relationship, and each risk will cause the relationship to either ebb or flow. The VR person's response to each shift will affect the quality of the growing partnership. An employer respects good old-fashioned honesty, and when the VR staff attempts to put spins on issues that cloud the truth in the marketing, the employer learns that the VR person does not respect the company's goals. Remember that the company's goals dictate all employer decision making. The first time the VR staff professional attempts to convince the employers to hire a candidate who is not truly qualified for the work, the partnership has been undermined. This deception tells the employer that VR does not have the qualified job candidates desired, and VR thus moves out of the employer's circle of trust.

A carefully selected employer, speaking to other potential employers, shows feelings of pride and ultimately increases the understanding of others in the private sector world. As employers become more educated about the public sector, they can actually become valued marketers of public sector services. It is important for the VR person to remember that the employer wants this partnership to succeed as much as the VR person does.

Be honest. Taking a risk is important in order to increase the potential of a relationship. However, the risks should never include the referral of unqualified job candidates. Employers that have been surveyed have made it clear that they are more than willing to interview and hire qualified candidates and even don't mind when the person's ability is close and a judgment call is needed. But substantially unqualified candidates sent with the hope of eliciting a sympathy hire are clearly a waste of time. This practice is interpreted as a form of dishonesty and can do irreparable harm to the partnership. Hiring agents are trained not to respond to their heartstrings, and any attempt to elicit this behavior will be seen as a demonstration that you are not legitimately interested in an equal and productive partnership. It is really better not to send any candidates than to waste the

employer's time.

Encourage investment. Once the employer is convinced that the partnership is mutually beneficial, there is a willingness on his/her part to invest time, resources, expertise, and even money to the relationship. It is beneficial to encourage this investment, as the employers want to make sure they will achieve a return on their investment. Encourage the investment, celebrate the investment, and continually remind employers of the investment.

Step Five: Maintain the Partnership

Maintenance of the relationship will survive as long as the relationship functions well. Functionality depends on both players benefitting from its activity. Both the employer and the VR staff will need to invest in the growth of the partnership. Each participant will have ample opportunities to shine on successes and to respond to difficult times. Given that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship, growth will likely depend on how each side responds to the bumps in the road. When the job candidate does not work out, the loyalties established may get the relationship through the difficult times. The employer that can make changes in his/her policies when discrimination may have taken place will likewise earn the respect of the VR staff, who in turn is more likely to better screen potential employees.

Know the players. The VR staff must take the time required to read any information provided by the employer. The staff's understanding of the company culture will demonstrate to the employer a willingness to do the homework as well as help the VR staff understand potential resolutions in the future. The policies and procedure manuals, employee handbooks, trade journals, marketing materials, and annual reports provide important information that will maintain the partnership.

It is equally important to provide the employer with any professionally produced material that will help them take advantage of all the services VR provides. VR needs to remember that it provides more than just potential employees; it also can provide expertise about many human resource issues. VR can also provide disability management information that is not generally available in the private sector. Encourage and invite employers to take advantage of the expertise of VR staff, as it will help maintain the relationship. A toll-free phone number for employers to call with disability-related employment questions may be just the marketing gem needed to demonstrate VR's skill and commitment to the partnership.

It will be important to stock up on the equipment, material information, and technology needed to respond to the questions of the employer. Employers are not interested in solutions (accommodations) that take months to activate. Employers want answers and solutions that are both effective and efficient. The VR staff's ability to predict what the employer may need to successfully employ consumers will save money and alleviate frustration.

Acknowledge the employer's pride. Successful employers have generally built their

companies, survived difficult times, and developed a confidence and pride in their service or product. That pride can benefit VR. Companies with upscale buildings or environments are often more than willing to show off their wares. These companies make great hosts for meetings, conferences, fund-raisers, or professional events. Given the opportunity to demonstrate their generosity and show off their wares, host companies will continually bring their wares to the table and likely provide the table as well.

Conclusion

To maintain any successful partnership requires hard work, dedication, and a legitimate commitment to a two-sided relationship. The employer should be courted, respected, and treated like a true partner, not a hard-to-understand client. The methodologies expressed in this chapter should help VR to develop the framework needed to identify, develop, maintain, and grow successful partnerships with employers. It is equally advisable to understand that employers, like consumers, are each different and will need to be studied and understood in order for success to grow. Each potential partnership will need flexibility and creativity. Continual assessment will take each partnership to its logical next step.

Chapter V
Successful Partnerships: Speaking the Same Language

Introduction

Business negotiations require clarity and concise presentations. However, the history of negotiations between the public and private sectors is filled with distrust and a lack of respect for what each partner brings to the table. One difficulty, when VR attempts to communicate with the private sector, is that we tend to use different languages. By not understanding each other's language, the relationship rarely starts on the same ground, and failure is often the result. Understanding and speaking the same language would give the private sector the opportunity to understand the goals and mission of the public sector, and it would provide the public sector the opportunity to present the goals clearly in understandable jargon. Understanding the language of the for-profit-world would also demonstrate that the VR counselor is willing to go the extra mile to ensure a productive and long-lasting relationship.

Why Learn the Language?

The private sector, usually driven by for-profit strategies, counts heavily on profit and loss, customer service, sales quotas, and the economic goals. The public sector driven by not-for-profit strategies tends to lean heavily on cost reimbursement, clients, service delivery, rehabs, and placement goals. A long-standing perception that exists within the private sector is that the public sector is untrustworthy, wasteful, and uninterested in economically driven decision making.

This section on language is more than a piece on verbiage. Language is an element of a larger understanding that identifies the relationship between the VR counselor and the private sector counterparts. A common language establishes a common starting and stopping point to all negotiations. The result is a higher percentage of cooperative relationships with the private sector. While respecting the needs of both, a common language discussion can lead to the progress of both parties toward a common resolution. This section is designed to provide logic and methods that can turn a sometimes unstable relationship into one of mutual benefit and respect. A common language is simply one of the methods that lets the private sector believe that the VR system can help with the goals it strives for.

The private sector makes decisions based on potential growth, which means that there is an inherent risk involved. The private sector manager expects a percentage of mistakes, which dictates that his/her task is to minimize the risk. The public sector makes decisions based on measurable human growth, which means that often decisions are as risk-free as humanly possible.

When the VR counselor uses the language of the employer, the employer is convinced that the VR counselor believes in his/her product (i.e., the job candidate). The VR counselor establishes the belief that the job candidate can help the private sector employer achieve his/her company's goals. Additionally, a common language establishes that the VR counselor is willing to do enough homework to understand the needs of the employer. The customer/employer will begin to believe that the relationship at hand has the potential to benefit his/her business goals and practices.

Business representatives, like counselors, are usually willing to do whatever it takes to do their job better and ultimately easier. Business representatives are people, with goals and plans not unlike the VR counselor or the job candidate with the disability. These private sector employers need to be convinced that the VR product (a service, a candidate, or a benefit) will assist in their goals for the future.

To accomplish the task of getting people with disabilities employed requires the counselor to accept certain beliefs:

- First, the counselor has to believe that the business representative is not the enemy to be conquered, but the partner to be courted.
- Second, while it would be helpful, it is not imperative for the business representative to understand the intricacies of human service.
- Third, a counselor needs to remember that like any other individual, the business representative is more comfortable when he/she feels like he/she can benefit from the relationship.
- Fourth, a counselor needs to remember that the business representative needs quality candidates (which means if the counselor cannot provide them, the employer will change vendors in order to get quality workers).

It is not uncommon to hear private sector employers maintain that their work, mission, or goal is the most important challenge. On the other hand, it is easy for VR people to assume that "people work" is more important than industrial-based work. If we can put these perspectives in balance and recognize that industrial-based work (completed by people) is important in terms of the economy, job opportunities, and the general welfare of the community, we will eliminate the first stumbling block to the development of the relationship.

To speak the language of the industry is simply the same as doing your homework. The counselor needs to remember that the business is primarily motivated by goal oriented management. Consultants who work with business representatives are consistently reminded that most successful business entrepreneurs have a basic trust in their ability to make decisions and to build their enterprise. Additionally, they recognize that employers will need to make tough decisions, which require risk taking and quick calculation. With that in mind, employers are generally busy, and the

conversation needs to be concise, to the point, and task oriented. The quicker the counselor gets to the point, the quicker the business representative can begin understanding the issues.

The purpose of learning the language of industry is to understand their decision-making process. The better the counselor understands what is important in the specific industry, the better the counselor can help hiring agents accomplish their goals. The sooner hiring agents accomplish their goals, the more likely that employer will be a repeat customer. The door will be easier to open and will stay open longer if hiring agents are convinced that you understand the company's interests. The best way to do that is to refer only those job candidates who will actually have a chance at being successful at that job. Employers tend to be intelligent, driven, motivated for success, and task-oriented people. They appreciate people who understand their dilemmas and respect the level of talent and skill needed by a successful job candidate. The VR counselor's willingness to understand what makes success and failure in a specific industry will minimize the pitfalls that often exist in the opening negotiations. Learning the language of a specific industry will educate the counselor about what brings job success and what leads to job failure.

All this talk of industry, economic goals, products, task orientation, and profits does not mean that business is not interested in altruism or philanthropy. Quite the contrary; most business representatives can be and are very generous. However, their success as a business lies in their ability to focus on what is good for the business and consider subsequently what feels good to the heart. The VR counselor should understand that personnel decisions are crucial to business success. Unless the VR counselor can convince the hiring agents that the job candidate will enhance the business, or otherwise support economic growth, then everyone's time is being wasted.

Therefore, the VR counselor who seeks generosity from the hiring agent by asking him/her to consider hiring a job candidate who is not quite qualified for the job should approach the situation cautiously; care should be taken by both sides. The job candidate who has less than adequate skills but who is nonetheless hired may never be appreciated. This employee might exhibit poor job performance and may encounter difficulties with supervisors and co-workers. This type of situation serves to exacerbate the stigma that currently exists for people with disabilities.

Where to Learn the Language

The language of industry may be learned in a variety of places. It does not require a total understanding of the industry; however, the more you understand, the greater the potential for a long and productive relationship. Learning the language is not a way of fooling the private sector employer, rather it is a way to demonstrate your interest in his/her work and a commitment to his/her definition of company goals.

The best place to get comfortable with the language of the private sector is to practice it in daily operations. Instead of using a language that is only understandable in public sector circles, it may make sense to manage the VR daily operations with terms similar to the private sector. The use

of for-profit language in our daily operations will train both counselor and candidate to the nuances of industry. The private sector does not need to understand our language as much as we need to understand theirs. Often we spend time attempting to get the private sector employer comfortable understanding our language. This knowledge is useful only when speaking to the public sector. We must realize that the employer sees the job candidate in the light of what the candidate can bring to the company. The counselor, in contrast, often sees the candidate as the culmination of months or years of growth and hard work. To the employer, the candidate is at the starting point, while the counselor sees the candidate as at the end of a process. While both interpretations are correct, the understanding of each other's perspective will help the relationship. The private sector is not as interested in how far the individual has come as they are in how far he/she can go. The hiring agent generally does not hire based on doing the client a favor. The hiring agent is first interested in what the person brings to the company.

How to Learn the Language

To gather information on the language of industry requires research and learning. The next section will describe six commonly used methods, but it is not intended to suggest that there are not other methods.

Suggestion One

Suggestion One, and most practical, is to ask within the VR office. A local industry may have ties to counselors, or staff, within the area office. It may prove beneficial to introduce a new company representative in staff meetings. Family and friends of office staff may have ties, which can help educate the counselor to the language and nuances of a specific industry. Ask how the particular industry measures success, what the social occasions are, and maybe most important, what the pitfalls and barriers to success are. Although this information may be flavored with opinion and personal perspective, it may serve as a great introduction.

It is important to note that the system counselors use to explore private sector opportunities needs to be well organized. The office will have to work as a team to make sure the employer is not given multiple messages. The points of contacts should be planned and reviewed for effectiveness.

Suggestion Two

Gaining knowledge about the language of industry will take time and effort. Each office should receive and review the local paper's business section. The smallest article buried on page 12 may be the key to the relationship. A coordinated plan as to who is working with which company will help in the search and review of articles. The knowledge of promotions, changes in the stock portfolio, potential business ventures, or product lines may be the key piece of information that demonstrates your desire to go the extra mile for the employer. The awareness about potential mergers may open opportunities for the VR counselor.

It may be beneficial to develop a relationship with the newspaper's business editor. This position often has a handle on the pulse of local business. The counselor may learn of a specific problem that is occurring at the local plant. This information could provide potential avenues to become involved in business solutions or, on the other hand, warn the counselor about what topics to stay away from. The knowledge of what not to say is certainly as important as knowing what to say. Each business decision requires a certain amount of risk, which means that things do not always go as planned. To mention a mistake, even though in good faith, to the individual feeling some responsibility for the decision, certainly won't create the feeling of trust needed to establish a relationship.

Suggestion Three

Learning the language of industry requires some research regarding specific trade journals. Most major industries have trade journals that highlight trends and practices to which the industry subscribes. While a VR office cannot subscribe to all journals, if there is a primary industry in a geographical area, the cost of one subscription (maybe shared by offices) could lead to more successful outcomes than would have been available without the information. And, most public libraries possess periodical sections that can be used in the information gathering process. Job candidates may want to take advantage of this resource also. With proper instruction, an intern could probably gather significant library information; time may not allow the counselor to enjoy the luxury of library trips. Publishers of journals usually have archives that can be used to study a specific plant or practice.

Suggestion Four

Take advantage of trade associations, which are usually more than willing to share their expertise and knowledge. Although there is often a cost involved in joining trade associations, they usually can be convinced to offer a not-for-profit rate. Also, a specific company might sponsor a membership in the association if it is convinced that it will get some return for its investment. As a placement specialist, the VR counselor tends to join associations that bring human resource specialists together. This is important and the money available for joining associations should be spread over multiple staff positions.

Learning the language of industry could provide the edge needed to compete with other sources of candidates to meet the changing needs of the private sector. Attendance at selected trade shows will identify the buzz words of business faster and more efficiently than most articles. Conversations with participants willing to share their current expertise and specialties will bring the knowledge and understanding required to converse comfortably with the local industry.

Suggestion Five

The age-old practice of going where the private sector goes may be more important than ever. The local Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary, Personnel Association, and the Main Street Business

Association are important places to watch, listen, and learn what the topics of priority are and to understand the language being used. The movers and shakers present are usually willing to share their expertise with others. Attendance at such events or organizations also makes it possible for introductions to be made.

Suggestion Six

The onset of the Internet in business is perhaps the greatest method of exploration to date. Employers are setting up web pages, which identify the goals, practices, and needs of industry. A search of the Internet can probably produce more valuable information than all the previous methods combined. The Internet provides an unequaled resource because employers are selling, advertising, marketing, and recruiting. This information is needed to develop positive relationships. Having a counselor who is well versed in Internet search techniques may be the fastest growing skill requirement for any VR area office.

The suggestions listed above are intended to point out the importance of communication when attempting to break through the relationship barriers that exist in today's public/private world. The main point of this section is to place the private and public sectors on the same side of the fence when addressing the issues of employment as they pertain to people with disabilities. The public sector possesses the rehabilitation expertise and job candidates that can help the private sector in economic growth. It seems like a partnership whose time has come.

Chapter VI
Successful Partnerships: Administrators, Are You Listening?

Introduction

This chapter will explain the key role VR administration plays in the development and maintenance of partnerships with employers. Based on feedback from employers, it highlights some of the needs employers have identified that VR agencies may help them to meet. It then addresses how VR agency administrators view employers in their role as customer and suggests some actions that can be undertaken to enhance the partnerships. It concludes with consideration of applying the same concepts to the role of "employer as customer" as the VR agency does in its assessment of its value and effectiveness in serving the "consumer as customer."

The Administrative Function

In all organizations the administrative function is one of support to the front-line staff in achieving the goals of the organization. It is the responsibility of administration to define these goals and allocate the resources necessary to achieve them. In general, the amount of the resources allocated to a particular goal reflects the importance of that goal to the organization. In addition, the amount of time and attention the organization spends on clearly defining its objectives and measuring its success in reaching a particular goal also reflects the relative importance of the goal to the organization.

Keep the Process With Employers Simple and Cost-Effective

Employers want the simplest, most cost effective and least intrusive process in which to participate. They will work with agencies who are responsive to their needs, i.e., those agencies who have anticipated labor market needs and can respond quickly to employers' requests for skilled candidates. They value the disability management support services that they can receive from VR agencies. They recognize that these services will assist them in addressing accommodation issues and help to teach their staff about people with disabilities, allay fears, and eliminate stereotypes. They anticipate overwhelming labor needs in the next few years, and many indicate that their survival rests in their ability to hire qualified individuals. Employers are telling us that they are more concerned about skills and abilities to do the job rather than the disability.

Coordination Is Essential

To be the least intrusive, the VR agency must coordinate its efforts in its dealings with employers. Employers complain about being inundated by VR agency staff, as well as

representatives from other organizations, soliciting information and/or placement opportunities for consumers. It is essential that the VR agency have an internal system to coordinate its contacts so that employers need only relate to a single person within the VR agency. Likewise, it is essential that the VR agency encourage cooperation from other organizations so that their efforts in reaching out to employers are combined and more effective.

Partnership Equals Survival

Strengthening partnerships with employers is critical to the survival of VR agencies. Agency administrators must assess how well their agency performs in this area. They must also determine which activities are effective as means to achieving partnerships. They must decide how to deal with the challenge of outsourcing employer development to community rehabilitation programs while maintaining the ties between employers and the VR agencies. Many community-based programs that get their funding and clients from VR agencies are outpacing VR in the establishment and maintenance of employer partnerships. The VR agency provides coordination, maintains consistency, and monitors the quality of services provided by community rehabilitation programs. It is essential that the VR agency's critical role in this regard remains evident to all. The challenge to the VR agency is to determine a means for maintaining effective utilization of community resources in assisting persons with disabilities into employment, while also entrenching itself in those employer partnerships as an equal player, not a silent partner.

Partnership Is More Than Placement

Some VR agencies have provided numerous tools for counselors to be effective in achieving success in placement and establishing the basis of partnerships with business. For example, agencies have, and continue to provide, training in placement, employ placement specialists, have job banks, have employer accounts, and in general have emphasized the importance of developing cooperative relationships with employers in order to facilitate placement. But placement is an outcome that occurs at a point in time and usually is considered the responsibility of front-line personnel. Employer partnerships are a long term process, developed over a period of time. Their development and maintenance are the responsibility of every employee of the VR agency, top to bottom.

In order to establish and nourish these partnerships, VR organizations must look at how they approach these relationships with employers. First, it is essential that the VR agency acknowledge the employer as a customer and reinforce to its staff the importance of service to these customers. This is not an end in itself, but rather a means to enhance the ability of the organization to achieve its ultimate goal. Accompanying the acknowledgment must be actions that illustrate commitment to this concept.

Leader to Leader

Administrators can demonstrate the value they place on this relationship by undertaking activities that will assist in laying the groundwork for the establishment of employer partnerships.

For example, the leader of the VR agency can influence and enhance the partnerships by actively working to develop relationships with the upper levels of management of various local businesses. Presidents and CEOs are generally the individuals who set the goals and practices within the company in hiring people with disabilities. By cultivating these relationships and through collaborative efforts, VR administrators can increase opportunities for front line individuals to secure consideration for their clients.

A related activity that can strengthen employer partnerships is the establishment of an effective business advisory council. Agency directors must ensure that the focus of the council is not so much directed toward the VR system and what it does, but rather how the VR system can assist employers. Additionally, it has been suggested by some employers that the most successful business advisory councils are those that have specific goals, specific agendas, and specific assignments for each member in order to keep business involved.

Likewise, VR administrators must consider reaching out to organized labor. It is apparent from the rise of Employee Assistance Programs that a goal of employers is to retain employees when performance is affected by a disability. Unions have the same goal. Engaging support from unions for such cooperative efforts will likely strengthen employer partnerships and, in turn, enhance the agency's goal of keeping people with disabilities employed.

It's Rhetoric Until It's Resource

The foregoing are direct activities in which top VR administrators may engage to strengthen employer partnerships. However, there are also many other areas that directors influence by policy and resource allocation, which have a direct impact on the ability of front-line staff in maintaining employer partnerships.

Image Is Everything

At its most basic level, the VR agency must project an image consistent with good business practices. This may require that administrators assess core practices to ensure that they are indeed business-like:

- Do employees of the VR agency present themselves to employers in a business-like manner?
- Does correspondence present an image of an efficient and business-like organization?
- Do staff respond in a prompt and coordinated manner to disability-related needs expressed by employers, and are they rewarded for doing so?

The importance of these essential agency activities cannot be overlooked, and agency administrators should establish standards for them, establish systems for monitoring them, and modify them as needed.

Additionally, for staff to be most effective in accomplishing the goals set by the agency, the necessary supports and resources must be made available to staff to achieve them. For example:

- Have systems been developed that will capture the data staff will need to identify consumers who may meet employers' present and future manpower needs?
- Are demographics and trends analyzed and their results provided to staff in a timely manner in order to allow them to anticipate those future needs of employers?
- Have technological resources been provided so that staff may communicate more effectively with employers in areas such as e-mailing of consumer resumes, etc.?

Resources Are More Than Money

The resources needed are not solely financial. The agency must assess the roles and responsibilities of every member of the organization, not just the front line personnel. Administrators must decide how to most effectively use their human resources to strengthen employer partnerships. Each employee's work activities must be evaluated against how their function supports those partnerships and contributes to the agency goal of successful placements. Everyone should be encouraged to follow the thread of their activities and to explore the impact those activities have on enhancing this important goal. If little relationship is seen or if no impact can be discerned, then administrators might review assignments to determine if they are consistent with the priorities of the agency. The goal is establishing effective employer partnerships.

Once these tasks are clearly defined, resources in the form of training must also be considered. For example, although much is made of the responsibility for individuals in the VR agencies to network, too often the assumption is that this is a natural behavior and all staff are capable of engaging in it. In truth, it is a skill which, for some, must be learned, and agencies must recognize when training is needed for this function. Unless agencies are willing to support their partnering efforts by allocating the fiscal and human resources necessary, they run the risk of having the professed objectives viewed as mere rhetoric.

Employer as Customer

Developing and strengthening employer relationships is sometimes difficult because of different assumptions and values that rehabilitation agencies hold compared to those that drive business:

> Human service agencies tend to focus on internal processes such as budgets, staff sizes, and numbers of individuals served, while businesses tend to focus on external feedback such as profits earned and performance outcomes. (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995)

Even when VR agencies consider ways in which to enhance relationships with employers, they tend to focus on employer attitudes toward people with disabilities rather than attitudes toward the services the employer received through the VR agency. As important as it is for VR agencies to assess the quality of services that its consumers receive, so too is it critical for VR agencies to assess employer perceptions of the quality of the service they receive and whether their needs have been met.

Focus on Customer Service and Satisfaction

To become more effective in serving employers as customers and, in turn, strengthening those partnerships, VR agencies must begin to focus less on process and more on the objective of customer service. The VR agency must

- Listen to what services employers are saying they value from VR;
- Assess how effectively the VR agency is delivering those services;
- Determine the employer perceptions of the quality of the service; and
- Assess the satisfaction of the employer as a customer.

These issues may not be discerned simply by assessing employer attitudes toward people with disabilities, but rather on the employers' assessment of the VR agency's "responsiveness, attitude and willingness to problem solve" (Fabian et al., 1995).

Treat the Employer-Customer as You Treat the Consumer-Customer

Many VR agencies have established programs offering services to employers. These agencies readily respond to employers as customers and view them as equally important as consumers. However, those strategies used in effective service delivery for consumers are often not considered when dealing with employers.

For example, Molinaro and Walls (1987) pose ten questions VR agencies might consider. While the specific suggestions presented by these writers may be argued as to effectiveness, they are presented here to offer to the reader a demonstration of the structured and organized approach VR has to consumers. Many VR agencies may not have such an organized plan of attack when attempting to serve employers.

1. Do you have thorough case files for employers, and are they reviewed by case work supervisors?

2. Do you write rehabilitation plans (similar to the IWRP) for employers?

3. Do you use time in staff meetings for discussion of employers?

4. Do new counselors inherit case files on employers?

5. Do form letters exist for employers?

6. Do you have a consumer advisory council made up of employers?

7. Do you have a brochure that is solely directed toward showing a service relationship with employers?

8. Does your agency's mission statement include employers?

9. Does your agency reward staff for working with employers?

10. Does your agency measure the contribution made to employers?

Although virtually all agencies could respond affirmatively to these questions for consumers, many would not be able to do likewise for employers. Additionally, the entire agency's collective contribution to and impact on employers is not usually measured (Molinaro & Walls, 1987).

It may be necessary to consider some innovative approaches to measuring agency success in partnerships. For example, as suggested by Molinaro and Walls (1987):

> Evaluation would establish criteria for good employer casework, look for substantial services to employers, and incorporate such criteria into consideration for promotion, positive feedback, and recognition. This goes beyond the current way of evaluating employer development with such indicators as the number of employers contacted, jobs developed, placement, and status 26 (successful) case closures. (p. 46)

Call for a National Meeting

Certainly there is a need to come to some consensus in the VR community as to how best to meet the needs of the VR employer-customers while enhancing services to our individual customer, i.e., people with disabilities. Further, as a national program, vocational rehabilitation is uniquely positioned to assist national corporate employers. With the proper development and coordination, it is possible for the VR system to offer a national network of services to them. Because concepts such as these are non-traditional ways of measuring success and because these are important issues, there will continue to be much debate about them. Perhaps it is time to convene a national meeting of employers, consumers, and VR administrators to outline a plan to discuss their value and viability. Administrators may wish to raise this possibility to their national organization for consideration.

Challenges to Administrators

- Evaluate the role of all employees to ensure their duties and functions support the development and maintenance of employer partnerships.
- Acknowledge the employer as a customer and reinforce this concept to staff.
- Design simple, cost-effective, minimally intrusive programs and/or services for employers.
- Develop and implement policies that reinforce the principle of strong partnerships with employers.
- Allocate resources to provide the necessary systems, data, and supports for staff.
- Determine training needs that will enhance employees' abilities to be effective partners with employers.
- Focus less on process and more on the objective of customer service for employers, as well as consumers.
- Assess how well the agency delivers services to employers.
- Develop and maintain relationships with CEOs.
- If a Business Advisory Council exists, assure its effectiveness.
- Establish and encourage relationships with organized labor.
- Consider innovative approaches to measure agency success in achieving the goal of strengthening employer partnerships.

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