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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: State vocational rehabilitation agencies (SVRAs) have been developing business relations capacity for decades, as part of a dual-customer approach. The literature to date explores "demand-side" strategies in VR, but little is known about what infrastructure is being built to sustain demand-side approaches.

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this study was to describe SVRAs' efforts to build capacity in business relations through current policies and practice, staffing and organizational structures, marketing and outreach, and other related strategies.

METHODS: Researchers conducted a web-based survey of the population of SVRAs ($n = 80$). The target respondent was the National Employment Team (NET) "single point of contact" for business relations activities at the SVRA.

RESULTS: Sixty-seven SVRAs responded to the survey. Results indicate that SVRAs are providing a wide range of services to businesses and engaging in a wide variety of business relations activities. VR has an infrastructure to serve businesses as customers, as supported by data reported about business relations staffing patterns, organizational structures, and qualifications of business relations staff.

CONCLUSIONS: The results provide important insights for developing a baseline measure of VR business relations capacity, which should be considered one element of the dual-customer approach and of demand-side strategies in general.

Keywords: Vocational rehabilitation, business relations, dual customer approach, demand-side strategies

1. Introduction

Business relations in vocational rehabilitation (VR), often referred to within the context of a "dual customer approach" or "demand-side strategies," focus on treating a business as a customer, just as a consumer with a disability is treated as a customer. This strategy has been discussed in the rehabilitation literature for over two decades (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999; McDonnall, 2016; McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013; Millington & Buys, 2010). In 1997, the Institute on Rehabilitation Issues released its 23rd study group report on "Developing Effective Partnerships With Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism" (Fry, 1997). The authors called for a concerted effort to close the gap between business and VR, and to identify both people with disabilities and employers as VR customers. Jenkins and Strauser (1999) highlighted the "horizontal expansion" of the role of the VR counselor to include additional responsibilities to meet the needs of businesses in the industry,

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taking into consideration that much of the responsibility for building employer relations and meeting business demands falls on the counselor.

A large amount of recent VR literature addresses counselor competencies, as opposed to broader VR agency management strategies, whereas demand-side research consistently recommends that VR counselors build competencies in areas including structural features of the labor market (Hagner, 2000), communicating with businesses (Stensrud, 2007), or developing a trusting partnership with employers (Buys & Rennie, 2001). Gilbride and Stensrud (2008) aim for a slightly different target and make recommendations for rehabilitation counseling educators responsible for training students. Furthermore, they recommend placing an emphasis on labor market knowledge, economic competency, and employer partnership skills in curricula.

Much of the research focus thus far has been on building individual counselor competencies. However, many SVRAs are investing heavily in hiring in-house job development staff and business relations staff. Also, many SVRAs are housed within state workforce development or state labor agencies, which creates management-level questions about how to integrate counseling and business relations functions.

In a recent discussion of the importance of business relations in VR, McDonnall (2016) highlighted the benefits of VR agencies using a business relations model (BRM). The BRM has been influenced by recent legislation, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, which places an increased focus on employer engagement. This approach places the focus on targeted efforts by VR agencies to establish long-term relationships with businesses, with a goal of placing a large number of consumers with those employers over an extended period of time.

Further, McDonnall (2016) reported results of a survey used to determine how VR professionals interact with employers, as well as use of the BRM and other techniques with businesses. Results of this survey research indicated that there was an association between how staff reported interacting with employers and the agency's employment outcomes for consumers. Additionally, the research findings indicated that the more counselors reported using practices consistent with the BRM approach and other specific techniques, the higher the likelihood that consumers served by their agency would obtain employment. Results from this recent research are further evidence of the need for VR professionals to use innovative business relations approaches, as well as for VR agencies to encourage these dual-customer approaches.

Evidence of the increasing emphasis on demand-side strategies has also emerged from the field. The National Employment Team (NET) is a field-driven initiative whose early work focused less on research and more on strategies for developing effective working relationships with businesses in the private and public sectors. The NET is supported by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), which established a permanent position for a director of business relations in 2005 and includes a business representative from each of the 80 VR agencies in the US (as of 2014), including the territories and D.C. The NET grew out of work with business and industry and the engagement of various VR agencies at the state level, including influential events such as a task force established in 1985 in Washington state, devoted to employment and marketing to businesses as well as a state-regional focus in Alabama and other areas around the country. A subsequent important event included a national meeting in 1988, in which Michigan hosted 13 state agencies and universities that served to refine the dual customer approach in VR. Lastly, a 2004 conference titled "The National Employment Conference 2004: Building with our Business Customers" was attended by VR agencies, CSAVR, RSA, university partners, and a large number of nationally and internationally recognized businesses (e.g., Starbucks, AirTran Airways, American Red Cross, CVSHealth). This was an important event for VR to gather feedback directly from business customers.

These events were influential in the NET developing a specific mission and infrastructure based on feedback from business customers: "To create a 'one company' model to serve business customers through a national VR team that specializes in employer development, business consulting and corporate relations." Nearly 20 years later, this dual-customer approach continues to be a priority for the state-federal VR system (McDonnall, 2016; McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013; Leucking, 2008). The new language in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) that amends the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding VR's work with employers is based on the work of the NET and businesses at the national, state, and local level.

To date, most research devoted to dual customer approaches in VR has focused on the perceptions of employers on hiring, training, and providing

reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities (e.g., Burke et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2010; Copeland et al., 2010; Domzal et al., 2008; Stensrud, 2007), the likelihood of employers to engage candidates with disabilities during recruitment (Fraser et al., 2011), potential benefits of providing accommodations for employers (Solovieva, Dowler, & Walls, 2011), and the employability skills valued by employers (Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2011). While these exploratory efforts provide a foundation for future research, the need to identify concrete strategies and develop research that leads to evidence-based practices in business relations for SVRAs is apparent. Unger (2007) points out that there is limited empirical evidence to support the development of sustainable business and rehabilitation partnerships. Similarly, although resources are available in the literature describing general approaches to job development, there is a lack of empirical research on job development strategies in relation to employers' preferences (Simonsen et al., 2011).

At present, the literature lacks empirical study of specific and existing VR agency strategies for identifying and meeting employer needs. In addition, little research has focused on demand-side practices being used in VR (McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013). This dearth of research interventions conducted within SVRAs has limited the opportunity for promising practices to evolve into evidence-based practices (Wagner et al., 2006). The ongoing identification and use of evidence-based practices in VR has been increasingly emphasized as an important mechanism to improve the effectiveness of VR service delivery practices (Leahy et al., 2014).

As a result of these initiatives, and considering the increased emphasis placed on dual-customer approaches in VR, the purpose of the present study was to describe SVRAs' efforts to build capacity in business relations through current policies and practice, staffing and organizational structures, marketing and outreach, and other related strategies. We hope to fill the knowledge gap by providing descriptive information about what is actually happening in state VR agencies, what practices may be emerging and have potential, and what infrastructure is being built to sustain demand-side approaches. The results provide important insights to VR business relations capacity, which is one element of the dual-customer approach and of demand-side strategies in general. These descriptors can also be used as the basic components of varying emerging models of business relations capacity, with the goal to link those

to employment outcomes for both job seekers and businesses.

2. Method

2.1. Survey participants

The survey population consisted of all state VR agencies in operation in 2014 ($n = 80$) located in the contiguous states, District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. The sampling frame did not include American Indian VR programs. In total, 67 SVRAs participated in the survey. VR agencies from 48 states and territories responded, including 24 combined agencies (serving customers with general disabilities including blindness/visual impairments), 23 general agencies (serving customers with general disabilities), and 20 agencies serving customers with blindness/visual impairments. This survey was conducted in partnership with CSAVR and the National Employment Team (NET). The targeted respondents for the survey were those who serve the NET's "single point of contact" (SPOC): a designated individual representing a state VR agency as the liaison to businesses and national efforts related to business relations.

2.2. Survey methodology

The survey was developed through an iterative process where researchers developed and tested a series of questions. Questions were edited after receiving feedback from senior policy fellows (i.e., project staff who have previously held leadership positions in state VR agencies prior to their current role at the university). A pilot survey was sent to four SVRAs, and their feedback was taken into consideration before the final version of the survey was disseminated to all SVRAs. The questionnaire was also submitted to the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) for approval and endorsement. This led to some minor revisions of the language used for a small number of questions.

The research team conducted recruitment of participants in partnership with CSAVR. The director of business relations at CSAVR maintains the membership list of the NET points of contact. The SPOC at each SVRA received an email invitation to participate in the web-based survey. State agency directors were also informed of the research, and were notified that the SPOC would be asked to respond on behalf of the

state VR agency. More information about the survey data provided can be found at www.ExploreVR.org.

2.3. Modules and instruments

The web-based survey instrument consisted of a total of 41 closed-ended (including single choice and multiple choices) questions and 12 open-ended questions that allowed participants to upload documents and provide detailed written answers. The web survey was programmed to facilitate skip patterns as appropriate. There were five topical modules in the survey instrument: Business Relations Strategies and Activities; Staffing and Organizational Structure; Marketing, Outreach, and Business Contacts; Use of Labor Market Data; and a topical module on Small Businesses. The instrument also contained a short "About You" section to collect demographic information from respondents.

2.4. Pilot survey

We conducted a pilot survey with four state VR agency SPOCs. Each SPOC was asked to complete a web-based survey and brief follow-up questionnaire about the relevance, structure, and quality of survey instruments. Based on evaluation of the pilot surveys, minimal changes were made to the survey instrument items or instructional text, and pilot participant data was included in the final sample for analysis.

2.5. Procedures

All survey materials and procedures, including recruitment and data collection tools, were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board to ensure the protection of human subjects in this research. Respondents received an email invitation to participate that contained a link to the survey. Data was collected using the web-based survey software SurveyGizmo. The survey was available in alternative formats (e.g., hard copy, Braille, large print) upon request. Researchers accommodated two requests to complete the survey over the phone and entered data electronically into SurveyGizmo. Survey respondents had the option to save their work and continue later using the automated SurveyGizmo feature.

The survey-fielding period was 12 weeks. To maximize response rate and ensure data quality, researchers conducted four waves of follow-up with non-respondents that included general (group) and targeted (individualized) emails and follow-up phone calls. During that time, responses were closely monitored in SurveyGizmo and tracked using a database in Filemaker Pro to target follow-up efforts to non-respondents. The survey was closed and data collection completed in November 2014.

2.6. Data analysis

We first extracted raw survey data from Survey-Gizmo and imported the data into the statistical software package SPSS 20.0. Using SPSS, we transformed and recoded key variables in preparation for data analysis. From this dataset, we generated descriptive and summary statistics for continuous variables, and frequency tables for categorical variables. The raw data and corresponding codebooks are available on ExploreVR.org for public access.

3. Results

3.1. Respondent profile: Who are the NET-designated SPOCs?

As stated, the targeted respondent for this survey was the VR agency SPOC who is designated by the agency director as the agency representative to the NET under CSAVR. The director of business relations at CSAVR keeps an up-to-date contact list of the individuals serving in this role at the 80 SVRAs. (In two states, at the time the survey was being administered, the same individual was serving as the SPOC in both the general and blind agencies). Together, the SPOCs form a national VR team that specializes in employer development, business consulting, and corporate relations.

Of the 67 SVRA respondents, 63 were actively serving as the SPOC at the time of data collection. Four respondents were designees. Individuals in the SPOC role held a wide variety of job titles, ranging from "Director of Employer Development" and "Business Relations Manager" to "Program Specialist" and "Rehabilitation Counselor." There was also a wide range among respondents' direct supervisors, from agency director/administrative level to VR supervisory level. The number of years the respondents had been in their current position ranged from less than one year to 30 years ($M = 6.4$ years, $SD = 6.0$).

The majority (41 of 67) of respondents reported a master's degree as their highest level of educational

Table 1
Single point of contact (SPOC) characteristics

Characteristic	Number of SPOCs (N = 63)	Percent of SPOCs
Level of Education		
Doctoral degree	2	3.2%
Master's degree	39	61.9%
Bachelor's degree	18	28.6%
Some college	3	4.8%
High school diploma	1	1.6%
Business Background		
Yes	29	46.0%
No	34	54.0%
Certified Rehabilitation Counselor		
Yes	28	44.4%
No	34	54.0%
Not Answered	1	1.6%

attainment, and many (20 of 67) held a bachelor's degree. Two respondents reported their highest level of educational attainment at the doctoral level, and three had some college or a high school diploma. More than half of the respondents (36 of 66) were not Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs). Many respondents (31 of 67) reported that they come from a business background. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1 for the 63 SPOCs specifically (excludes the four designee respondents).

Of the 30 respondents that described their business background prior to their tenure at the SVRA, many worked for a private corporation ($n = 17$), for a small business ($n = 15$), or in sales ($n = 15$). Thirty percent indicated that their background included membership in a Chamber of Commerce, a third were business owners, and nearly a quarter had started a business ($n = 7$). Others had backgrounds in human resource management ($n = 6$), public relations ($n = 6$), or non-profit management ($n = 5$), and some held a business degree ($n = 6$).

Respondents were asked about the key responsibilities of the SVRA's SPOC. The majority (48 of 63) indicated their key responsibilities as serving as the first point of contact for businesses, and marketing VR business services at the state level. The SPOCs are often also responsible for coordinating services provided to businesses ($n = 46$), and for coordinating a team of staff who work with businesses ($n = 43$). More than half ($n = 42$) conduct training for businesses, provide services directly to businesses ($n = 39$), and manage agency resources dedicated to business relations ($n = 39$). Many SPOCs are also responsible for connecting qualified applicants with businesses ($n = 36$). Many ($n = 18$) respondents listed additional

key responsibilities in the "other" option, and one person selected the response option "don't know." Designees reported similar key responsibilities for their SVRAs' SPOCs.

3.2. Business relations strategies and activities

3.2.1. Business relations services

The first module of the survey included questions about how the VR agency interacts with businesses, focusing on VR agency strategies and activities aimed at serving businesses as VR customers. When asked if the VR agency serves businesses as VR customers, 59 of 66 responding SVRAs confirmed that they serve businesses (public, private, and non-profits) as VR customers. Seven agencies indicated that they do not serve businesses as customers, and one agency did not respond.

VR agencies were then asked to report the types of services they provide to businesses and the types of business relations activities the agency engages in. Of the VR agencies serving business as a customer, most provide a range of services (see Table 2). The top five most frequently provided services are 1) accommodations (e.g., work site assessment, assistive technology), 2) pre-employment services, 3) staff training (e.g., disability awareness, Americans with Disabilities Act/employment laws), 4) financial supports (e.g., Work Opportunity Tax Credit, barrier removal), and 5) human resources/staffing (e.g., recruitment or retention supports). Other frequently provided services included marketing and outreach, compliance support (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and affirmative action), diversity programs, and Universal Design (e.g., contracts/facilities, information technology). Fewer than 10 VR agencies provide product development services, legal services (e.g., labor relations, policy development, risk management), or other services to businesses.

3.2.2. Business relations activities

Most VR agencies are also engaged in a wide variety of business relations activities. Key areas of business relations activities that nearly all SVRAs currently engaged in, shown in Table 3, are 1) participating in business networks, 2) establishing business partnerships, 3) marketing to businesses, and 4) maintaining contact with businesses after initial contacts. Other common business relations activities reported by 65–75% of responding agencies included 1) organizing employer recognition events, 2) involvement

Table 2
VR agencies providing services to businesses

Services to business	Number of VR agencies	Percent of respondents
Accommodations (e.g., work site assessment, assistive technology)	55	94.8%
Staff training (e.g., disability awareness, ADA/employment laws)	54	93.1%
Pre-employment services (e.g., internships, training)	54	93.1%
Financial supports (e.g., Work Opportunity Tax Credit, barrier removal)	51	87.9%
HR/staffing (e.g., recruitment or retention supports)	49	84.5%
Marketing and outreach	41	70.7%
Compliance support (e.g., EEOC and affirmative action)	40	69.0%
Diversity programs	34	58.6%
Universal Design (e.g., contracts/facilities, information technology)	26	44.8%
Product development	8	13.8%
Other	8	13.8%
Legal services (e.g., labor relations, policy development, risk management)	6	10.3%

Table 3
VR agencies engaging in business relations activities

Business relations activities	Number of VR agencies	Percent of respondents
Participating in business networks	56	96.6%
Establishing business partnerships	55	94.8%
Marketing to businesses	54	93.1%
Maintaining contact with businesses after initial contact	53	91.4%
Organization employer recognition events	44	75.9%
Involvement in federal contracting	42	72.4%
Hosting business job fairs or hiring events	41	70.7%
Sending thank you cards to business partners	41	70.7%
Maintaining electronic databases to track business contacts	38	65.5%
Administering business satisfaction survey	17	29.3%
Other	3	5.2%

in federal contracting, 3) hosting business job fairs or hiring events, 4) sending thank-you cards to business contacts, and 5) maintaining electronic databases to track business contacts. In addition, 17 of 58 VR agencies administered business satisfaction surveys.

3.2.3. Marketing, outreach, and business contacts

Nearly half of the respondents (32 of 65) indicated that the SPOC's contact information is available on their VR agency's website, while 55 of 64 reported that their VR agency's website provides information on the VR services available to businesses. Furthermore, 63 VR agencies indicated that their websites provide links to several sites pertaining to business relations. Sixteen VR agencies also indicated that their agency's website provided links to other entities, such as the National Federation of the Blind NEWSLINE® (nfbnewslineonline.org) and the Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org).

Overall, the SVRAs relied heavily on personal contacts to conduct outreach to businesses. Their preferred methods were 1) personal contact by VR counselors (54 out of 65 agencies), 2) personal contact by the NET SPOC (53 out of 65 agencies), and 3) contact through job fairs (53 out of 65 agencies).

The agencies seemed to rely heavily on printed marketing materials as a method of interaction. Some agencies (26 out of 64) also use an electronic contact management system or database, such as a digital Rolodex, to manage business contacts. Just over half (33 of 63) of the agencies collect data other than contact information from businesses, although the methodology and frequency of data collection vary greatly.

3.2.4. Effectiveness of business relations services

When asked about the three areas in which the VR agency is most effective in serving businesses, the 57 respondents most frequently chose responsiveness to business needs ($n = 47$), deliverability on commitments ($n = 43$), and quality products and services ($n = 30$). The consistency of services within and across agencies ($n = 19$), and having internal infrastructure that supported sustainability of the strategies ($n = 15$), were also areas in which VR
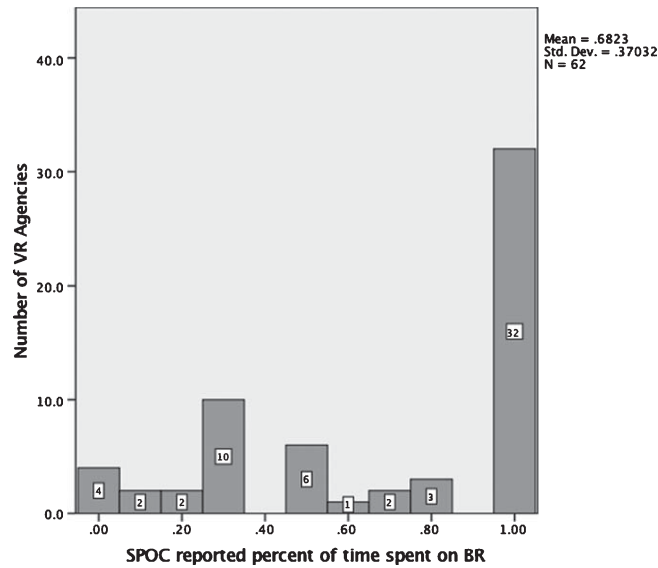
Fig. 1. VR agency-reported SPOC time spent on business relations ($n = 62$). Bar chart with x-axis (Range = 0.00–1.00, interval units of 0.20) representing percentage of time spent on business relations by single points of contact and y-axis counting number of agencies. Mean = 0.6823, Standard Deviation = 0.37032, and N = 62.

agencies claimed effectiveness in serving businesses. Only two respondents referred to "trust in the working relationship with businesses" as a top area of effectiveness. When respondents were asked to select the top three components that they consider most important when managing business relations, communication ($n = 50$), timeliness of response ($n = 48$), and trust ($n = 33$) were the most frequently selected components.

3.3. VR agency staffing and organizational structure

The next section of the survey contained questions about VR agency staffing patterns and agencies' organizational structure. Respondents were asked to indicate how much of their time they spent on business relations using a number of FTEs (full-time employees/equivalents). The amount of time spent on business relations in the various agencies ranged from 0 to 1 FTE, with more than half of respondents (32 of 62) indicating that they spend 1 FTE, or 100% percent of their time, on business relations (see Fig. 1).

VR agencies were also asked to report the number of specialized staff, defined as staff that spent more than 50% of their time on business relations. Of the 66 VR agencies that responded to this question, 46 indicated that they had specialized VR staff that spend more than 50% of their time implementing business relations strategies. The number of individuals

that performed those functions varied across agencies (mean = 10.40, median = 5.0, range = 69). See Fig. 2.

Sixty-five respondents reported that additional VR agency staff (other than the NET SPOC) had business relations job responsibilities, and the most frequently selected staff was the VR counselor ($n = 40$). Other staff with business relations responsibilities included job placement specialists ($n = 34$), regional points of contact ($n = 24$), administrators ($n = 21$), and other staff ($n = 20$). The respondents that indicated "other staff" specified contractors, program specialists, and business development specialists. Most respondents ($n = 52$) reported that business relations responsibilities were also fulfilled using external resources or staff such as community rehabilitation providers (CRPs).

3.3.1. Business relations personnel qualifications

Responding agencies ($n = 64$) reported on the basic qualifications that business relations personnel should possess. The most frequently selected qualifications were experience developing effective relationships with businesses ($n = 55$), knowledge of business and employment practices ($n = 53$), and experience with disability-related issues and solutions in the workplace ($n = 53$). Business-oriented skills (e.g., marketing and outreach, understanding of VR services available to business at a state and national level, business development) were more
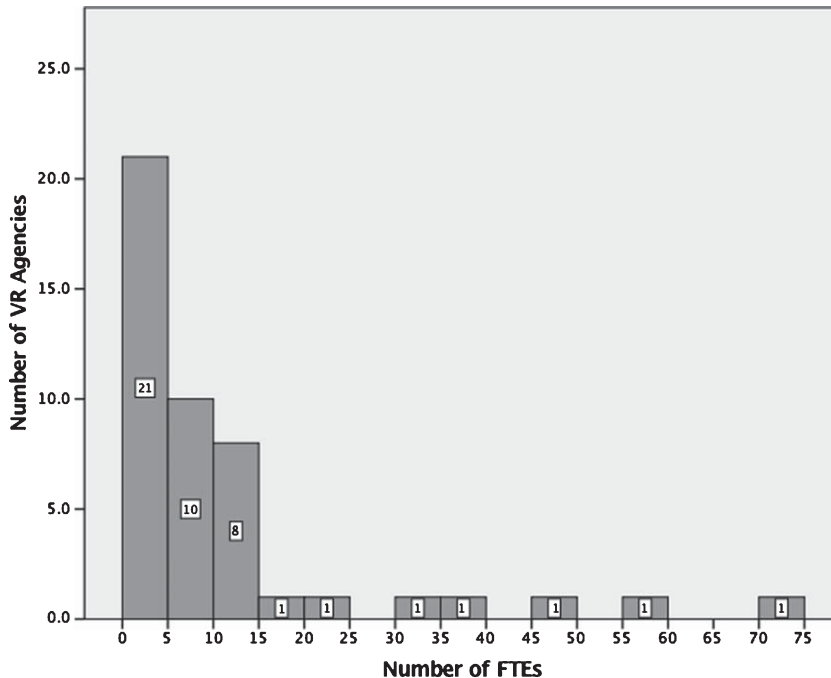
Fig. 2. VR agency-reported number of FTEs that are "specialized staff" (spend more than 50% of their time on business relations). Bar chart with x-axis (Range = 0–75, intervals units of 5) representing number of FTEs that are "specialized staff" (spend more than 50% of their time on business relations) and y-axis counting number of agencies. Mean = 0.6823, Standard Deviation = 0.37032, and N = 62.

frequently selected than other proposed skill sets, such as staff development and training or strategic planning.

Respondents also proposed a number of additional qualifications and skills, such as the ability to meet the immediate needs of the business in a timely manner, sales and marketing experience, and training experience. Although 27 of the 61 respondents reported having no specific training for business relations staff, agencies that do offer such training provided sample training titles such as "Business Relationship Training," "Business Relations 30-Day Training Plan," and "Effective Employer Relationships."

4. Discussion

4.1. Context for discussion of vocational rehabilitation practice, pre-service training, and the federal-state vocational rehabilitation role in the workforce development system

At the time of this survey, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act was just enacted after considerable debate in Congress and among key stakeholders. Regulations had not yet been promulgated, but three significant changes of relevance for this survey came into play: 1) the requirement that VR agencies expend funds on business services and report on common performance indicators of success for businesses as customers, 2) the change in educational requirements for rehabilitation counselors, and 3) the requirement that VR is a core program in the workforce development system and thus must align itself with Adult, Dislocated Workers, and Youth programs, Wagner-Peyser, and other core programs.

Just prior to WIOA's enactment, in January 2014, President Obama released a memorandum requiring among others the Cabinet Secretaries of Education, Commerce, and Labor to become more "job-driven" by implementing a set of strategies and tactics including "promoting more active engagement with industry, employers and employer associations, and worker associations" (https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/30/presidential-memorandum-job-driven-training-workers). Vice President Biden released a report in July 2014 that provided a full examination of the knowledge to date in job-driven strategies used across the workforce system (https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov//sites/default/files/docs/skills_report.pdf).

4.2. Requirement that VR agencies build capacity in serving businesses

WIOA legislates this requirement, and the RSA issued regulations providing more guidance. Thus, VR agencies have a mandate to build capacity from a job-driven or demand-side approach. The call is not just how to interact with businesses on behalf of a particular job seeker or job seekers, but to create a "business as customer" approach that extends beyond job placement. VR agencies now need to answer the call to show they are a core program that addresses the needs of businesses in their state, locality, or region. Such a call may be to respond to planned layoffs, build middle skills training initiatives, and create career pathways for youth. To what extent can VR assist businesses to accomplish those goals? What kinds of internal processes, staffing, and structures need to be in place? This survey illustrates that VR agencies were already building that capacity, that some states had high levels of capacity, and that others may need to think more from a "business as customer" or "job-driven" approach rather than a "job seeker by job seeker" or "supply side" approach.

Overall, VR agencies reported a high volume and range of services to businesses and business relations activities. The results indicate that almost all VR agencies are providing a core set of services to businesses (accommodations, pre-employment, and staff training), and many offer financial supports and HR/staffing supports. A similar pattern emerged when VR agencies reported on business relations activities. Almost all VR agencies seem to be engaging in a common set of business relations activities (participating in business networks, establishing business partnerships, marketing to businesses, and maintaining contact with businesses after initial contacts). This survey data indicates that VR agencies use a combination of business services, relationship-building activities, and specific programs and initiatives as part of business relations. All of these approaches should be considered when examining business relations capacity. While the results indicate that state VR agencies are doing multiple business relations functions, SVRAs have likely made very different decisions about the intensity of those functions.

This is of critical importance in the field at the moment, as WIOA requires SVRAs to serve businesses as customers, report on performance outcomes for businesses, and partner with workforce systems on activities like career pathways, middle skills training, use of labor market information, and responsiveness to local economic needs. The timing of this survey (2014) allows the field to look at a baseline of capacity prior to implementation of major system changes. Taken in sum, the results of this survey function as a baseline measure of capacity prior to full WIOA implementation, and may serve to concretely define aspects of business relations as it is conceptualized and implemented in the field of vocational rehabilitation.

In an example of how this data can be applied to the field, the Rehabilitation Services Administration funded multiple entities to operate Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) to support SVRAs to build capacity, either as a response to President Obama's Memorandum on Job-Driven Training for Workers, or to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. The Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC), housed at the Institute for Community Inclusion, was tasked with improving business engagement strategies, improving integration of labor market information into the rehabilitation process, supporting customized training initiatives, and improving employer supports. Data from this survey was used as a baseline measure of capacity and as a source of information about the choices peer SVRAs had made about business relations infrastructure. The JD-VRTAC has provided technical assistance to 16 state VR agencies, some of which are creating business relations units, hiring full-time personnel, and building data systems to capture engagement strategies. See for example the Business Engagement Toolkit on the ExploreVR.org portal (http://www.explorevr.org/toolkits/business-engagement).

4.3. Changes in educational requirements of rehabilitation counselors

A particularly contentious element of WIOA was the change in minimum educational requirements, from master's degree back to bachelor's degree (which had been the minimum requirement in the pre-1992 Rehabilitation Act). McClanahan and Sligar (2015) argue that such a change will create a workforce of VR counselors with limited preparation and skill, just as demand is high and potentially growing. But another approach is also possible, and appears to be a strategy employed by many VR agencies that have faced challenges in recruiting and retaining master's-level rehabilitation counselors in their state: team approaches.

What functions are most critically assigned to master's-level counselors, and what other functions can be deployed to a variety of personnel who have advanced specialty knowledge? The emergence of Certified Work Incentive Counselors, who have highly technical command of complex financial work incentives programs across systems, and assistive technology (AT) specialists, who have advanced knowledge of a wide range of AT devices, are two examples of personnel that are actively being brought in-house. While it is imperative that VR counselors have an understanding of work incentives and AT devices, there still remains a need for personnel who spend all of their work time in these subject areas. Many VR agencies, as evident in these survey results, are considering business relations functions as meeting a similar need. Some elements of business relations are the responsibility of everyone in the agency, including VR counselors. But some elements are beyond the role of a counselor with duty and obligation to a caseload of jobseekers. Should VR agencies use the time of a critical staff position (VR counselor) to develop new career pathways initiatives with workforce partners? Or should the VR agency have a business relations unit that can build those initiatives and represent the entire agency across the state, to ensure that any job seeker interested in that career pathway has access to it?

The results presented from this survey show that 69.7% (46 of 66 reporting agencies) of VR agencies have specialized VR staff (staff that spend more than 50% of their time) implementing business relations strategies. This data is consistent with previous results of a survey of SVRAs conducted in 2011 at the Institute for Community Inclusion, which found that 70% (45 out of 64 reporting agencies) of SVRAs employ "business employment representatives" (Porter, Kwan, Marrone, & Foley, 2012), although the terminology used to define the specialty staff is not consistent. Most responding VR agencies dedicate staffing resources to business relations, including many ($n = 32$) that have a SPOC who spends 100% of their time dedicated to business relations.

When examining the number of FTEs that are specialized staff responsible for business relations reported by VR agencies, we see that business relations responsibilities extend beyond one person at the agency, and likely beyond the individual holding the SPOC role. The range of FTEs reported by VR agencies was large (min = 1, max = 70) but there appear to be some outlying agencies, as the number of VR agencies reporting more than 30 FTEs was

relatively small. Overall, these survey results are likely an underestimate of VR agency total investment in staff responsible for business relations, as these figures do not capture VR agency staff who did not meet the definition of "specialized staff" in that they spend less than 50% of their time on business relations. As Porter, Kwan, Marrone, and Foley (2012) suggest, it may be useful to examine the number of specialized business relations staff in proportion to the total number of agency staff, or the ratio of specialized business relations staff to consumers served.

In addition to internal staffing patterns, a large number of VR agencies use some level of external resources or staff (e.g., community rehabilitation providers, or CRPs) for business relations support. This survey did not attempt to estimate the level of use of CRPs for business relations with resource measures, but it is likely that VR agencies that use external resources like CRPs may have different approaches to business relations from agencies that do not use vendors. Measure of provider capacity and level of use will be critical data to inform the growing knowledge base of business relations in VR. Additional research in this area, in particular research investigating the collaboration and partnership of VR with CRPs and contractors for business relations, could be of value to the field.

These survey results indicate that there are basic qualifications, skill sets, and training requirements that may lend themselves directly to serving businesses, which is consistent with previous research findings (McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013). Almost half of the SPOCs come from a business background, and more than half of them are *not* Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs). The profile of business relations staff may serve to complement the qualifications and skills of the VR counselor. However, the survey results also indicate that business relations responsibilities are dispersed among other staff and positions within the VR agencies, including VR counselors, job placement staff, and regional points of contact. Within this staffing framework, the "horizontal expansion" of the traditional counselor role will likely continue in some form.

Overall, the survey results indicate that VR agencies are approaching business relations staffing in a variety of ways: by hiring specialized staff with a specific background, by using existing talent within the agency, by contracting community providers to meet the needs of businesses, or through a combination of techniques. These survey results will provide

an important foundation of general knowledge of the current staffing patterns that will allow us to observe changes over time and measure the impact of these agency decisions. Staffing patterns and organizational structures of VR agencies are highly variable, and these survey results show that VR agencies are using different constellations of staff, outside resources like CRPs, and partners to build business relations capacity. There may be value in using this survey data to look for patterns and describe different typologies or approaches to business relations.

4.4. Requirement that VR is a core program of the workforce development system

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIOA's predecessor) required that VR was a mandated partner and that the systems aligned locally through One-Stop Workforce Centers. Such questions as sharing space, costs, and staff were very prevalent during early implementation. With WIOA, the requirements are less about interagency coordination and more about how the public sector aligns to seamlessly serve business and industry. How might this be accomplished? The answer is not at the individual job seeker or counselor level. Instead, it may be found in the ways that business relations functions intersect with other public systems, so that any given industry or sector can interact with VR to meet its labor needs.

VR agencies supported by the NET and CSAVR have been developing and evolving a business relations (demand-side) approach that can adapt flexibly to the footprint of a business. Business that are in multiple states can easily connect to, identify, and work with all the single points of contact in those states, rather than all the individual counselors who may have job seekers with interest in that business. Those SPOCs can coordinate with counselors if team approaches, communication systems, and rapid data sharing are in place.

So the question is not about who participates in business relations, but how to fully deploy a dual-customer approach as a system. The training and education of VR counselors is vital as a supply-side solution. In concert with a highly trained and agile business relations unit as a demand-side response, VR agencies could fully realize a dual customer approach that can work at micro- and macro-levels.

We reported on the emerging structures, staffing, and deployment strategies. The next wave of research should examine team approaches, communication systems, and rapid data sharing.

5. Limitations

The current research has some limitations. First, the survey was given at a single point in time, and should be interpreted as a snapshot of business relations approaches among the state VR agencies. However, our survey is among the first attempts to capture the contemporary VR practices of demand-side strategies, and therefore should serve as important baseline information. A planned follow-up study by the authors includes in-depth interviews and a second wave of surveys in an effort to build longitudinal data collection.

Second, the survey is a self-reported measure of how SVRAs are approaching business relations practices, capacities, and activities, rather than an empirical investigation of the implementation of business relations strategies. The authors relied upon the knowledge of the SPOCs to accurately and comprehensively describe SVRA business relations. At the time of data collection, 14 SPOCs had worked in an SVRA for less than 5 years, and therefore might not be aware of all agency policies and procedures beyond their specific scope. We hope to uncover this in subsequent waves of survey research.

Third, research participants were asked to respond to some survey questions on behalf of their employer (i.e., the SVRA), and to respond to other survey questions as themselves (the survey referent). This change in survey participant referent (i.e., organization or individual) for the various questions may have led to some confusion and inaccurate responding among select research participants, and could be a source of reporting error.

Fourth, there is the potential for misunderstanding of key concepts and/or survey questions among research participants, which may have resulted in reporting error/bias. As evidence, we asked respondents to choose from a list and to describe additional partnerships regarding business relations, but their answers covered a broad range of partnerships far beyond relationships developed in the business relations context.

Finally, certain questions could have been asked again, possibly in reverse order of inquiry, as some of the individual survey results indicated contradictory responses to survey questions. For example, one respondent indicated that they were their state's SPOC, but also indicated that they do not spend any time (reported as percentage of FTE) on business relations. Having related follow-up questions might have

limited and accounted for the occurrence of contra-dictory responses such as this one.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore SVRA capacity related to business relations. This study was the first of its kind of which the authors are aware, and provides a baseline of information about VR agency approaches to engaging and serving businesses. This baseline may be especially important given the passage of WIOA, which places a greater emphasis on connecting business services and business relations to employment outcomes. Under WIOA, state VR programs are given authorization to provide expanded education and services to employers interested in hiring individuals with disabilities. This includes consultation, technical assistance, and support with workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and workplace access. Through collaboration with community partners and businesses, VR agency services can assist businesses to recruit, job-match, hire, and retain qualified individuals with disabilities.

The results provide insights to VR business relations capacity, which is one element of the dual-customer approach and, more generally, of demand-side strategies. Future research can build upon this knowledge base of VR business relations to further explore how the investment in demand-side strategies may impact employment outcomes for people with disabilities, although determining a correlation may be a challenge.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

None to report.

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