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Kandace T. Jones, *Utah State University*

Trenton J. Landon, *Utah State University*

Kayla Currier Kipping, *Utah State University*

Michelle Lizotte, *Utah State University*



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State Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors' Knowledge of the Discovery Process in Customized Employment

Kandace T. Jones
Utah State University

Kayla Currier Kipping
Utah State University

Trenton Landon
Utah State University

Michelle McKnight-Lizotte
Utah State University

Researchers surveyed state vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) working with job seekers receiving Customized Employment (CE) services. The survey included CE activities developed from a prior Delphi study conducted by Riesen, Hall, Keeton, and Jones (2019) with employment specialists deemed experts in CE, along with short answer questions on barriers and promoters to successful CE implementation. Fifty-three vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) completed the survey and their responses regarding necessary CE activities corresponded with the Riesen et al. study, such as completing home visits and speaking with local businesses. However, barriers remain, including limited access to funding, adequately trained community rehabilitation programs (CRPs), and community resources. Positive factors for CE included collaboration with community agencies, families, and local businesses.

Keywords: customized employment, Discovery, disability, mixed methods

With continued attempts to expand knowledge regarding customized employment (CE), it is important to acknowledge the role of vocational rehabilitation (VR) in the CE process. Large caseloads for vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) often inhibit their ability to provide thorough job exploration and development services, resulting in VR agencies contracting with (community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) and providing payment for specific services based on hourly or milestone (i.e. job placement) rates (Ford et al., 2017). This service agreement requires the VRCs to maintain communication with the individual and the CRP beyond monthly progress reports, in order to ensure quality service provision both on par with the contract and beneficial to the job seeker. Due to the contractual relationship between VR agencies and CRPs, it is important to gain perspective

regarding the counselors' expectations and understanding of CE as implemented by CRPs.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2018), 18.7% of people with a documented disability were employed in 2017 compared to 65.7% for individuals without a documented disability. The BLS (2018) also reported that between the two populations, workers with disabilities were more likely to have part-time employment, earn lower wages, and work in service or material moving positions. With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (29 U.S.C. §. 3101, 2014) came several provisions meant to increase services and access to competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities (Jorgensen Smith, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Kenney, 2015). WIOA (2014) defines competitive integrated employment as full or part-time work earning minimum wage or higher, with benefits and wages comparable to other employees, and in an integrated setting with people without disabilities (34 CFR 361.5).

Kandace Jones, EdS, CRC, 2865 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-2865.

Email: kandace.jones@aggiemail.usu.edu

This legislative change came in the midst of a decline in integrated employment services from state agencies for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD), going from 24.2% in 2001 to 18.6% in 2015 (Winsor et al., 2017). These services assist job seekers in finding and maintaining competitive, integrated employment within the community through job development and job coaching supports. This decrease in services resulted in only 17% of people from IDD agencies working in integrated employment during 2015. Conversely, states have seen an increase in people with disabilities being served in community- and facility-based non-work settings (Winsor et al., 2017).

As the employment rate for people with disabilities consistently falls far below that of their nondisabled peers, practitioners are adopting more consumer-driven services that provide individuals and families with more decision-making power (Winsor et al., 2016). There is also the ever-increasing push towards the promising practice of CE (Inge, Graham, Brooks-Lane, Wehman, & Griffin, 2018) due to various projects resulting in successful job placements through the use of CE services (Riesen, Morgan, & Griffin, 2015).

In June 2002, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) defined CE as a “flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job seeker and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both” (Federal Register, June 26, Vol. 67, No. 123 pp. 43154-43149). ODEP also described CE as a combined set of services that may include job development, restructuring, and negotiation strategies utilized to meet the individualized employment needs of persons with disabilities. Later, WIOA (2014) included CE into the definition of supported employment, describing CE as a set of services focusing on the skills, needs, and interests of the individual, as opposed to labor market information, and often leads to self-employment or developing a new position with the assistance of an employer.

CE is an individualized job search and development process for people with significant barriers to employment. CE consists of four phases including (a) Discovery, (b) job search planning, (c) job development and negotiation, and (d) post-employment support (Harvey, Szoc, Dela Rosa, Pohl, & Jenkins, 2013). During the job search planning phase, the VRC and job seeker develop a plan centered on the job seekers’ interests and strengths and includes selecting a CRP with whom the client would like to work. With an employment specialist working with the CRP, the job seeker solidifies their job search plan, generates a list of potential employers and may also complete a benefits analysis. The benefits analysis involves reviewing social security benefits, as well as assistance from other support programs that may be impacted by changes in employment income. Completing this analysis prior to securing employment will further educate the job seeker on different income requirements across support programs and prepare them for any changes. Job development and negotiating includes the employment specialist working with the employer to customize a job that accounts for necessary accommodations for the job seeker while also addressing the employer’s needs. Accommodations may include, but are not limited to, a stool for sitting as needed, frequent breaks, or an ergonomic chair. Although the job seeker is working primarily with the employment specialist during this time,

the VRC is responsible for following up with the job seeker and employment specialist on their progress in job development. The VRC may even assist by forwarding job leads. The final component, post-employment support, consists of ongoing monitoring by the VRC and employment specialist to ensure that the relationship between the now employee and the employer remain satisfactory (Harvey et al., 2013). While these three components are important for job placement and retention, the first one, Discovery, not only helps build rapport between the job seeker and the employment specialist but aids in answering the imperative question “Who is this person?” (Griffin, Hammis, Geary, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 136). It sets the foundation for the entire CE process. For this paper, the authors will focus on the Discovery stage of the CE process.

Discovery focuses on learning about varying aspects of the job seeker, such as their interests, learning style, support system, environment, and current skill level (Condon & Callahan, 2008). Discovery has been deemed the “foundation of customized employment” and essential for job negotiation and employment as it provides an opportunity for the employment specialist to get to know the job seeker (Inge et al., 2018, p. 158). An employment specialist builds a comprehensive conceptualization of the individual by combining appropriate disability related documentation with information gathered from semi-structured interviews with the job seeker, family members, and other individuals who know the person well (Condon & Callahan, 2008). The employment specialist may also observe the job seeker in their home and community and use all the information gathered to build a vocational conceptualization that sets the foundation for job search planning (Condon & Callahan, 2008).

Participants in a study by Inge and associates (2018) discussed the benefits of common Discovery practices, such as visiting the person’s home. This step helps build rapport between the job seeker and employment specialist and provides insight into the person’s support system. Visiting the home also provides the employment specialist with more information regarding neighborhood resources, such as transportation. Another important practice noted in the study was conducting informational interviews with local businesses. This step goes beyond inquiring about job openings by allowing the employment specialist to get a more in depth understanding of the industry of interests and specific business needs. One participant likened the informational interview to the Discovery stage for job seekers (Inge et al., 2018).

This information was supported by a Delphi study conducted by Riesen, Hall, Keeton, and Jones (2019) in which the researchers worked with employment specialists to develop consensus regarding the key components of CE Discovery. The experts agreed on aspects such as completing home visits to gather information about the job seeker’s personal connections, daily activities, interests, and community resources. Another important factor included developing a vocational profile using the information gathered during the Discovery process, highlighting the job seeker’s skills and accomplishments (Riesen et al., 2019). The current study builds off of agreed upon components by obtaining input from VRCs to determine their understanding of Discovery as compared to employment specialists.

The purpose of this study is to identify VRCs' level of understanding regarding the Discovery component of CE using criteria provided by CE experts in Riesen et al. (2019). The study reviewed the potential connection between the years of experience providing CE and understanding of the Discovery process. The study explored the VRCs' views towards the Discovery process. By using cross-sectional data gathered via an online survey distributed through Qualtrics (2019), this study sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

- 1) What is the extent of state VRCs' knowledge regarding the Discovery process within customized employment?
- 2) What is the correlation between years of customized employment experience and knowledge of Discovery?
- 3) What is the correlation between training received in customized employment and knowledge of Discovery?
- 4) What are VRCs' views towards the Discovery process?

The partnership between VR agencies and CRPs is an important one in ensuring the employment success of job seekers. The responses to these research questions will allow researchers to compare the VRC's understanding of CE to that of CRPs and potentially identify needs for additional training on the Discovery process.

Method

Participants and Procedures

A mixture of snowball sampling and convenience sampling was used to recruit study participants (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Initial recruitment for this cross-sectional study took place by emailing the survey to the directors of VR and blind and vision services for every U.S. state and territory (including American Samoa, District of Columbia, Guam, Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands). The current agency director names were retrieved from the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) website, then a basic internet search produced the email addresses for each director. The email to agency directors explained the study and asked directors to forward the survey to their employees who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) present employment as a state vocational rehabilitation counselor and (b) have a caseload with individuals requiring CE at any point in fiscal years 2014 through 2017.

Data collection was completed using Qualtrics (2019). Approval for the research project was obtained through the author's institutional review board prior to the start of data collection. Initial data collection procedures yielded 161 participant responses, however, many of these ($n = 79$, 49.1%) did not complete questions past the demographic portion of the instrument, and another 29 (18%) did not fully complete the survey. Because of the sharp drop off in survey completion, the research team felt using only those responses that were fully completed was appropriate. This led to 53 (32.9%) usable VRC participant responses, which were included in the data analysis process. A response rate was not calculated as it was not possible to track how many VRCs were contacted through the recruitment efforts.

Instrument

The researchers used a 55 item instrument, that was comprised of (a) 21 demographic questions; (b) 19 items designed to measure

the level of importance of specific Discovery activities related to customized employment 7 point Likert style scale, 1- No Importance to 7 – Very Important); (c) 11 items measuring perceptions of customized employment (7 point Likert style scale, 1- strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree); and (d) four open ended questions that were designed to assess both barriers and supports to the customized employment process within State/Federal VR agencies and also with community rehabilitation programs. This instrument was prepared by the lead researcher and was based off of recommendations from prior research (Reisen et al., 2019). The questions mirrored the Discovery components on which the experts received consensus in the study by Riesen and colleagues. This instrument was then vetted by two individuals with experience conducting research specific to customized employment. Revisions and adjustments were made to the original instrument based upon this peer-based feedback. The instrument was then piloted by four individuals familiar with customized employment, the State/Federal VR system, CRPs, and general survey design to ensure the overall purpose and flow of the instrument were appropriate prior to the start of data collection. These individuals completed the survey and spoke with the researchers regarding the clarity of the questions and their relevance in answering the research questions.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using SPSS version 25 for Macintosh (IBM Corp, 2017). The item analysis conducted on the two customized employment activities and perceptions domains included in the survey indicated strong internal consistency across the importance of CE scale ($n = 53$, items = 19, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$) and weak internal consistency on the perceptions of CE scale ($n = 53$, items = 11, Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). Participants were collapsed into three different groups based on self-reported number of years of experience working in VR (i.e., one to four years; five to ten years; 11 or more years). Differences between groups were explored using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA); a post hoc Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) test was also conducted.

Qualitative analysis. The thematic analysis recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006) were used to analyze the participant responses to the four open-ended questions included at the end of the instrument. This six-step process included: (a) two members of the research team independently reviewing the qualitative responses, (b) the independent generation of initial codes and themes, (c) collapsing of codes and solidifying themes, (d) review of themes and drafting thematic maps, (e) ongoing analysis through group discussion and review, and (f) production of the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through the use of general inductive qualitative approach, two coders began with open coding to determine major categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each coder completed this step independently, after which they met to reach consensus on the categories, achieving agreement on two major themes. Within each of the major themes, the two coders identified and agreed upon subthemes.

Demographics

Participants in this study reported working in the VR profession for an average of 9.23 years ($SD = 7.81$, range of 1 to 42 years), with the majority of participants ($n = 49$, 92.5%) possess-

ing a masters' degree. Participants held a variety of licenses and certifications with the most prominent being certified rehabilitation counselor ($n = 29, 54.7\%$) and licensed vocational rehabilitation counselor ($n = 13, 24.5\%$). A total of 34 (64.2%) participants reported receiving training specific to CE through a variety of employer, university, and community settings and ranging from 1 to over 100 hours of training ($m = 19.81, SD = 21.71$). Twenty-two participants (41.5%) of the sample reported having a billing structure for Discovery services associated with CE within their state. When asked if a separate billing structure was in place for Discovery services, 37 (69.8%) indicated there was no difference. Of those 16 (30.2%) reporting a different billing structure, responses varied from established billing structures ($n = 12, 50\%$), to under development ($n = 2, 12.5\%$) and unsure ($n = 2, 12.5\%$).

Quantitative Results

Activities Associated with CE

Participants were asked to rate the level of importance of 19 activities specifically related to customized employment. These activities were identical to the activities on which the employment specialists in the Riesen et al. (2019) study reached consensus. Table 1 outlines the items based on perceived level of importance.

General Perceptions of CE

Participants were asked to describe their current level of knowledge of the CE process and the various components of CE (i.e., Discovery) on a seven-point Likert style rating (1- Strong Disagree to 7- Strongly Agree). The group felt knowledgeable regarding both the various components of CE ($m = 5.66, SD = 1.18$) and overall process of CE ($m = 5.62, SD = 1.15$). These 11 items reflected participants' insights on CE delivery and how VRCs and agencies prepare for and deliver CE. Table 2 outlines participants' agreement with the root statements provided in the survey. There was no statistically significant difference regarding the impact of VRC training in CE on their knowledge of or views towards the Discovery process in CE.

Impact of Years of Experience

Following the format of the corresponding survey question, participants were grouped into three categories by years of experience (i.e., one to four years, five to 10 years, 11+ years) in order to examine the influence that the number of years of experience had on the perceived importance of specific customized employment activities using a one-way ANOVA. The participants were distributed relatively evenly across the total years of experience with 21 (39.6%) having five to 10 years of experience, 16 (30.2%) in both the one to four years of experience and 11 or more years of experience groupings. Statistically significant results were noted on duration of time associated with customized employment (i.e., The customized employment Discov-

ery process should be a minimum of 35 hours over a five to seven-week period; $F_{(2, 52)} = 3.57, p < .05$). Early career professionals' (up to four years of experience) responses reflected an attitude of placing less importance on the amount of time associated with the Discovery process compared to VRCs with five or more years of experience, who reflected a strong perception that time was pertinent to the Discovery process. No other statistically significant differences between the groups were noted on either the activities associated with CE or general perceptions of CE.

Qualitative Results

Fifty-three respondents participated in four qualitative questions included in this survey. These questions sought to gain information regarding activities that promoted and acted as barriers towards successfully implementing the CE Discovery process for both VRCs and CRPs. Within each section, subthemes were developed. Study participants noted two factors that promoted the successful implementation of the CE Discovery process. These promoting factors were categorized into two subthemes including (a) collaboration, and (b) training. Likewise, subthemes related to barriers that hinder the CE Discovery process were also identified. These hindering factors included (a) lack of organizational support, (b) limited trainings, and (c) limited resources. Below, each subtheme is outlined in greater detail with participant quotes to give context to the qualitative findings.

Promoters of the CE Discovery Process

Collaboration. Mentioned by 39 of the 53 participants who completed the qualitative portion of the survey, collaboration was identified as the prominent promoter of the CE Discovery process. VRC's described collaboration as being represented through relationships, family involvement, and the presence of community partnerships. Phrases used to illustrate collaboration included "constant networking", along with "being engaged in the community to connect with businesses, learning about employment trends, and educating employers on the benefits of customized employment".

Table 1. Importance of Specific CE Activities

Item	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>
*Observe the job seeking completing activities demonstrating their skills, interests, and support needs.	6.42	1.13
*Gather information regarding the job seeker's expressed interests.	6.38	1.21
*Gather information regarding the job seeker's current responsibilities and chores.	6.26	1.18
*Ensure the employment seeker has the opportunity to try new tasks in businesses that match their skills or vocational themes.	6.13	1.32
*Gather information about the employment seeker's daily life.	6.11	1.17
*Create opportunities at local businesses for the employment seeker to participate in activities related to their skills or emerging vocational interests.	6.09	1.36
*Explore the job seeker's neighborhood through contact with other locals and businesses to gain different perspectives on work opportunities.	5.98	1.32
*Gather information about the employment seeker's personal connections.	5.96	1.27
*Gather information from the job seeker's family and friends	5.96	1.39
*Gather information related to the employment seeker's skills and support needs by observing them participating in activities in novel community locations.	5.87	1.30
*Assess the employment seeker performing activities of daily living (e.g., self-help, personal hygiene, and eating).	5.87	1.51
*Observe the employment seeker actively participating in familiar activities in the home or community that demonstrate multiple tasks or skills and reveals potential.	5.79	1.5
*Conduct a home visit.	5.77	1.59
*Use the recommendations and feedback gathered from business representatives during information interviews to guide future Discovery.	5.74	1.58
*Explore the employment seeker's neighborhood by talking with key people, such as neighbors, business owners, and members of community institutions.	5.57	1.32
*Conduct three to five informational interviews in businesses without apparent job openings that match the employment seeker's skills and vocational interest.	5.51	1.63
*Include others in the neighborhood explorations to gather different perspectives.	5.34	1.51
The customized employment Discovery process should be a minimum of 35 hours over a 5 to 7-week period.	5.21	1.38
Customized employment Discovery should be used as an alternative to traditional vocational assessments.	4.89	1.71

*Preceded by the stem: During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should...
 $n = 53$; 7-point Likert style scale: 1 – No importance to 7 – Very important

Another factor found within collaboration was frequent communication with other agencies and CRPs, regarding the CE process as a team approach. Study participants reported the importance of including supervisors and administrators in on collaborative communication so that they were aware of the varying circumstances and supports needed – including needs for possible policy changes. One example of a policy change included adapting the pay structure to better accommodate the Discovery process. For instance, some VRCs reported only having 10 hours of services to authorize per month and not being able to authorize Discovery as a separate service from CE. VRCs also noted the importance of communicating with families to ensure they understood the process and expectations associated with CE Discovery.

Training. With 17 responses, VRC's and CRP's engagement in training was another factor identified as promoting successful CE Discovery. Specifically, training was noted as crucial to a unified understanding of CE Discovery across all stakeholders. In addition, the accessibility of trainings seemed to be a prominent factor related to their effectiveness. Participants noted that low cost or free local trainings allowed a greater number of stakeholders to participate in them.

VRC's suggested that trainings increased understanding of and willingness to follow the entire CE process, reducing the likelihood of VRCs and CRPs bypassing the necessary steps outlined in the CE process by moving straight towards employment. The participants emphasized that through engagement in trainings, the purpose of the initial steps of CE Discovery (i.e., home visits, interviews, visual resumes, and job coaching support) become valued. By using phrases such as “get to know your consumer – this builds their trust and confidence,” the VRCs stressed the need to build rapport with the jobseeker and continue that support throughout.

Barriers to the CE Discovery Process

Lack of organizational support. A major concept within this subtheme included policy concerns, particularly regarding the approval process and funding for conducting CE Discovery. VRCs noted that their methods of paying for services did not align with the CE model for service delivery. One VRC suggested making Discovery a separate service, as opposed to billing it using the regular CRP rate. This act would shift the focus to the completion of specific activities versus hours billed. Another counselor stated, “budget restrictions make it difficult to fund a prolonged Discovery period.” Within this theme is also the high VR caseloads resulting in less time available to spend with consumers, with counselors noting their caseloads as “prohibitive” and “time intensive.”

Limited training. Another noted barrier was the lack of training VRC's were receiving specific to the CE Discovery process. With CE Discovery being a “relatively new practice”, there is a “lack of familiarity” within agencies creating a limited understanding of the process. Respondents also discussed a limited understanding of what supports VRCs need to facilitate CE Discovery effectively. One VRC noted this by stating that “it is unclear how much more effective Discovery is than a regular assessment completed for job coaching services”. This lack of training pertained to both the VRCs and the CRPs.

Limited resources. This subsection highlighted the strain of limited community resources, such as limited access to public transportation, on the CE Discovery process. This subsection also focused heavily on barriers experienced in collaborating with employers. A reality that many small or rural communities lack an abundance of employers to build relationships with was noted by research participants. In addition to a limited number of employers being available, participants noted that some employers are not willing to engage in the CE Discovery process. One VRC stated, “I believe that some employers have difficulty understanding this novel approach because they are too conservative. Because of that, they are used to the traditional Labor Market approach”.

Discussion

Legislative initiatives, such as the passage of WIOA (2014), have been put forward to promote the use of CE for disability service professionals such as vocational rehabilitation counselors and community rehabilitation providers. For example, WIOA (2014) added CE to the definition of supported employment which allows disability service agencies to allocate financial resources and time towards engagement in CE. In addition, CE has been identified as a promising practice for promoting competitive integrated employment of persons with disabilities (Inge et al., 2018) and positive outcomes associated with the use of CE include increased quality of life, higher wages, employment in full and part-time work, and consistency in wages earned and hours worked over a 2-year follow-up period (Riesen et al., 2015).

Overall, the results of this study echoed those reported by Riesen et al. (2019) when surveying employment specialists deemed experts in CE, showing that there is a consensus between VRCs and employment specialists regarding the necessary components for a successful CE outcome. Even when accounting for VRC's years of providing CE services, only one factor showed statistically significant variation – the amount of time spent on the Discovery process (35 hours over a five- to seven-week period). VRC's with five or more years of experience providing CE found time to be more pertinent than did VRCs with less than five years of CE experience. This finding suggests that as a person grows within their profession, their comfort and knowledge may increase in relation to this advanced and individualized practice. In addition, participants with more experience may have been allotted more time to gain familiarity with the necessary components of CE and recognize the benefit of the time demands associated with successful CE.

Table 2. General Perceptions of CE

Item	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>
Discovery is essential for customized employment.	5.87	1.42
CE leads to better outcomes for people with disabilities.	5.57	1.59
CE is essential for securing competitive integrated employment for individuals with most significant disabilities.	5.55	1.62
VR should fund Discovery services for all individuals receiving CE.	5.49	1.54
All people with disabilities would benefit from the Discovery process.	4.57	1.92
Supported employment is sufficient for job placement.	3.94	1.63
VR counselors receive adequate training in CE.	3.94	1.82
There are sufficient resources available to aid in providing CE.	3.45	1.61
Providers are knowledgeable of how to implement CE services.	3.40	1.50
CE provides no added benefit to securing employment.	2.92	1.84
Discovery provides no added benefit to CE.	2.47	1.55

n = 53; 7-point Likert style scale: 1 – Strong Disagree to 7 Strongly Agree

Several factors on which VRCs' knowledge and perceived importance of CE and the Discovery process paralleled that of the CRPs in the Riesen et al. (2019) study. These factors included, but were not limited to, having employment specialists conduct home visits, speaking with local businesses, and observing the job seeker completing various tasks at home and within their community. The Discovery process allows CRPs to build a rapport with the client, while getting a more in depth understanding of the client's abilities. Furthermore, Discovery also exposes the CRP to the local labor market and encourages networking and relationship building with employers through informational interviewing. In a study by Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, and Gelb (2012), networking with employers to understand their business needs led to more job finds for employment specialists. Despite this consensus between VRCs and employment specialists on both the importance of CE and the necessary components of the Discovery process, VRCs continue to face barriers in achieving successful CE outcomes. VRCs elaborated on these barriers through the short answer responses in the qualitative portion of the study.

The qualitative findings of the current study suggest that training continues to be a major barrier to the implementation of CE. Lack of training appears to have a ripple effect across other barriers to CE. Respondents ($n=16$) of the current study reported that they experience limited access to providers that can facilitate the CE process to fidelity. Riesen et al. (2015) suggested the implementation of a CE fidelity scale for use while training CRPs. Additionally, having these guidelines may allow for improvement in budgeting and funding allocation, another concern of the VRCs. This last step may require adjustments to VR agency policies, as VRC's noted how the policies (e.g. allowing only 10 billable hours per month per client) were misaligned with the CE process, some mentioning not being able to bill separately for Discovery.

While the quantitative data did not show a statistically significant difference in the impact of VRC training on knowledge of the CE Discovery process, the qualitative results showed VRC training as a promotor of successful CE outcomes. Potential reasons may be variations in the quality of training, time since receiving training, and actual experience using the CE training. As previously mentioned, having a fidelity scale (and possibly continued education) may synchronize the CE knowledge across agencies.

One prominent factor that promoted successful CE outcomes, as identified by the VRCs, was collaboration. This aspect of service delivery emphasizes a team approach and recognizing what different agencies have to offer in terms of serving our populations. The need for collaboration also includes families and the job seeker. In other words, making sure the all parties are fully invested and understand the process. Collaboration allows for increased understanding of the roles, services, and policies of partner agencies, allowing for more streamlined service delivery. Building this relationship also promotes the integration of resources (Fesko, Varney, DiBiase, & Hippenstiel, 2008). Dividing fiscal and personnel responsibility may reduce the strain on any one agency. Each partner agency can communicate what specific services they provide, allowing the team to identify the gaps and potential ways to fill them. In a study by Taylor, Morgan, and Callow-Heusser (2016), participants suggested that collaboration might improve

by implementing joint interagency trainings. This approach may prove beneficial by both ensuring everyone is receiving the same information and by providing a space for both VRCs and CRPs to share openly their respective expectations regarding CE. This communication, along with coordinating services through a collaborative process may promote successful employment outcomes (Riesen & Oertle, 2019).

Several studies exist regarding the implementation of CE from the views of employment specialists (Riesen et al., 2019, Wehman et al., 2016). This study provided the VR perspective regarding CE, including factors that both promote and prohibit the provision of CE services. This perspective is important due to the increasing emphasis on interagency collaboration, which involves the coordination of services, understanding of each partner's roles, and sharing of information (Oertle & Trach, 2007). When implementing a service that requires multiple parties for a successful outcome, it is important to include the views of all involved. Additionally, with VR agencies being charged with funding the CE services that employment specialists provide, it is imperative that VRCs have a complete understanding of what those services entail. With this study, the researchers were able to get a better understanding of what VRCs know and what importance they place on CE when it comes to successful employment outcomes. Knowing that there is a consensus between CRPs and VRCs regarding the need for CE and having more insight on the barriers of implementing CE may encourage agency level policy changes to allow for more streamlined service delivery.

Qualitative results were imperative to this research as they provided a deeper understanding of the quantitative results found in this cross-sectional research. Qualitative research provides context to quantitative data and brings forth the voices of the participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This mixed methods approach provided more tools for data collection and thus a more complete picture of the information gathered.

Limitations

This study relied on state VR directors to distribute the survey to their employees who have clients on their caseloads receiving CE services. Without having direct access to the desired population, the researchers have no way of knowing how many counselors received the survey and if all potential participants were contacted. Of those who started the survey, not all completed it – resulting in a reduction in the number of respondents. The limited number of participants, along with the use of a convenience sample, reduced the generalizability of this study. There may be VRCs who were not sampled whose knowledge and perception differ from the participants in this study. Another limitation was not asking the participants their state or territory of employment. As each location may have taken different steps regarding training and CE implementation, it is impossible to know which is impacted the most by specific barriers or if there are variations in perspectives of CE based on region.

One factor that may have affected the results is providing the counselors a list of Discovery activities. Doing so presented the participants with information they may not have previously known, thus resulting in them not necessarily expressing their knowledge

but simply agreeing or disagreeing with the information presented. This method prevented the researchers from gaining a complete picture on what VRCs know. Using a research question to reflect agreement on Discovery versus knowledge of Discovery may have been more suitable.

There is also the potential for social desirability bias. Although the responses were anonymous, the participants may have wanted to present themselves in a more positive light by responding with answers they perceived were acceptable versus answers they reflected their level of knowledge and actual perceptions (Grimm, 2010). This bias may have been exacerbated by having the directors (their bosses) disseminate the survey.

Implications for Research

Additional research is needed to determine what type of training both VRCs and employment specialists are receiving and how that correlates with both outcomes and attitudes regarding CE services. This statement ties in with using a fidelity scale to synchronize and streamline training for both CRPs and VRCs. There also needs to be more studies highlighting the employment outcomes from CE, including job retention – showing the long-term success of implementing this process. While this study mentioned what promoted job placement, it did not address job retention and that factors that contribute to it. Furthermore, research regarding state agency expenditure on CE services and time spent in CE compared to employment outcomes would benefit VR agencies in determining appropriate budgeting of time and monetary resources. Addressing these concerns may help optimize caseload sizes for VRCs and creating spending plans that align with the amount of work conducted by the CRPs, as well as the VRC agencies' policies.

Future research can also expand on the differences in VRCs' perceptions regarding the importance of time spent in the Discovery process based on the number of years of VR experience. Considering the potential for increased knowledge of CE with additional years of experience, researchers can address how VRC experience correlates with familiarity and comfort with the time demands of CE.

Implications for Practice

The implications for research tie into practices for state VR agencies by providing a foundation for developing new policies and procedures to increase successful CE employment outcomes. These practices include having state VR agencies assess their spending to determine more efficient ways to allocate the necessary funds for CE, including the Discovery phase. This assessment should also include ways to lessen the caseloads of VRCs to allow for more time for service delivery per job seeker. By providing VRCs with adequate time and funding, they can maintain frequent communication with employment specialists and job seekers regarding progress, as well as assist in the process by researching local businesses and other community resources that may aid in job placement and retention. Administrators from state VR agencies and CRPs should increase coordination at their level to aid the VRCs and employment specialists in fostering productive and collaborative relationships.

Furthermore, using a research-backed fidelity scale would provide strict guidelines for CRPs to follow and the means for VR agencies to evaluate the programs based on fidelity. VRCs can also compare the information provided in service reports with the scale to ensure CRPs are following through with the program as designed. This approach may ensure that expectations of VRCs and CRPs remain aligned.

Conclusion

In this study, the researchers examined state VR counselors' knowledge of the Discovery stage of CE. After reviewing the responses of participants, results showed that at least some state VR counselors agreed with employment specialists from the Riesen et al. (2019) study regarding the necessary components of the Discovery process (such as home visits and speaking with local employers); however, the lack of trained personnel and financial resources frequently prevented them and CRPs from following through with the Discovery process. This input from VRCs provides more insight into what is needed for more streamlined service provision and job placement for VR clients. Knowing that VRCs and CRPs agree on the Discovery process and CE as a whole, state and CRP agencies can use this information to reform their policies and procedures for serving clients who require CE services.

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Appendix

Survey Questions from Qualtrics

Demographics:

1. Years of experience working as a vocational rehabilitation counselor
2. Years of experience working in state VR
3. Highest degree
4. Certifications and Licenses
5. For 2014-2018 fiscal years, did you or do you currently have individuals on your caseload requiring or receiving customized employment services?
*Answering "No" ended the survey
6. How many individuals did you close in status 26 through customized employment in the 2017-2018 fiscal year?
7. What was the average length of stay on your caseload for these individuals?
8. What was the average cost at closure?
9. Have you had training on customized employment?
 - a. How many hours?
 - b. Who provided the training?
 - c. Was a certification provided?
10. How many years of experience do you have providing customized employment services?
11. What types of experience do you have providing customized employment services?
12. Does your state have a separate billing structure for Discovery services within customized employment? If yes, describe.

Knowledge of Customized Employment (Compared to Employment Specialist Consensus):

The following section provides a list of customized employment Discovery activities. Please rate the importance of each item using the following scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

1. The customized employment Discovery process should be a minimum of 35 hours over a 5 to 7-week period.
2. Customized employment Discovery should be used as alternative to traditional vocational assessments.
3. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should conduct a home visit.

4. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information from the job seeker's family and friends.
5. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information regarding the job seeker's expressed interests.
6. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information regarding the job seeker's current responsibilities and chores.
7. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should observe the job seeker completing activities demonstrating their skills, interests, and support needs.
8. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should assess the employment seeker performing activities of daily living, such as self-help, personal hygiene, and eating.
9. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should explore the job seeker's neighborhood through contact with other locals and businesses to gain different perspectives on work opportunities.
10. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should include others in the neighborhood explorations to gather different perspectives.
11. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should explore the employment seeker's neighborhood by talking with key people, such as neighbors, business owners and members of community institutions.
12. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should observe the employment seeker actively participating in familiar activities in his or her home or community that demonstrate multiple tasks or skills and reveals potential support need.
13. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information about the employment seeker's personal connections.
14. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information about the employment seeker's daily life.
15. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should create opportunities at local businesses for the employment seeker to participate in activities related to their skills or emerging vocational interests.
16. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should gather information related to the employment seeker's skills and support needs by observing them participating in activities in novel community locations.
17. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist and the job seeker should conduct three to five informational interviews in businesses without apparent job openings that match the employment seeker's skills and vocational interests.
18. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist and the job seeker should use the recommendations and feedback gathered from business representatives during information interviews to guide future Discovery activities.
19. During the customized employment Discovery process, an employment specialist should ensure the employment seeker has the opportunity to try new tasks in businesses that match their skills or vocational themes.

Open-Ended Questions:

1. In the space below, please list barriers to the customized employment Discovery process that you have encountered at the state rehabilitation level.
2. In the space below, please list barriers to the customized employment Discovery process that you have encountered at the community rehabilitation provider level.
3. In the space below, please activities that promote successful customized employment Discovery process that you have encountered at the state rehabilitation level.
4. In the space below, please activities that promote successful customized employment Discovery process that you have encountered at the community rehabilitation provider level.

Views on Customized Employment:

The following section will assess opinions regarding customized employment. Please rate the importance of each item using the following scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

1. Customized employment is essential for securing competitive integrated employment for individuals with most significant disabilities.
2. VR counselors receive adequate training in customized employment.
3. There are sufficient resources available to aid in providing customized employment.
4. Providers are knowledgeable of how to implement customized employment services.
5. Discovery is essential for customized employment.
6. VR should fund Discovery services for all individuals receiving customized employment.
7. Customized employment leads to better outcomes for people with disabilities.
8. All people with disabilities would benefit from customized employment.
9. Supported employment is sufficient for job placement.
10. Customized employment provides no added benefit to securing employment.
11. Discovery provides no added benefit to customized employment.

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