



The Dual-Customer Dynamic: How are State VR Agencies Developing their Staffing and Agency Infrastructure to Meet the Needs of Businesses?

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The Vocational Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Demand-Side Strategies at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) is a national center for improving the vocational rehabilitation (VR) system's responsiveness to employer needs in changing economic environments. The center conducts research, training, and technical assistance activities regarding dual-customer approaches that focus on the VR system serving businesses as a customer, while also meeting the needs of people with disabilities who are seeking employment.

As part of this effort, the center administered the **2014 National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Business Relations** to further examine state VR agencies' capacity for assessing and meeting business needs. The survey was led by ICI researchers, and conducted in partnership with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the National Employment Team (NET) to collect data about emerging dual-customer initiatives and business relations strategies.

The survey was administered to all 80 VR agencies, including the District of Columbia and the territories. Its targeted respondents were the NET single point of contact (SPOC) for each state, designated to serve as the primary person to coordinate with businesses on behalf of each VR agency. Overall, 67 VR agencies responded to the survey.

The survey contained five modules:

1. Business relations strategies and activities
2. Staffing and organizational structure
3. Marketing, outreach, and business contact
4. Use of labor market data
5. Small businesses

This brief focuses exclusively on the staffing and organizational structure module, intended to determine the skillsets of business relations staff as well as the VR agency infrastructures within which these individuals operate.

In the 2014 National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Business Relations, 46 out of 66 (68.7%) responding VR agencies reported that they had specialized VR staff that spend more than 50% of their time implementing business relations strategies.

The ICI research staff members who administered the 2014 survey published their findings on VR business relations capacity in an article titled **Vocational Rehabilitation and Business Relations: Preliminary Indicators of State VR Agency Capacity** (Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation 48 (2018) 133–145). This brief examines findings on VR business relations staffing patterns as reported in the survey and observed from providing technical assistance to VR agencies.

Staffing: Who is performing business relations functions for VR agencies?

Although business relations staffing for VR agencies across the nation varies in number of staff and job duties, most agencies surveyed indicated having staff that specifically employ agency approaches for business engagement and outreach at least half-time. In the **2014 National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Business Relations**, 46 out of 66 (68.7%) responding VR agencies reported that they had specialized VR staff that spend more than 50% of their time implementing business relations strategies. This information is supported by a previous survey conducted by the Institute for Community Inclusion in 2011, where respondents were asked a similar question. In the **2011 VR Survey of Characteristics Across States**, 45 of 64 (70.3%) agencies had business employment representatives/placement specialists (Porter, Kwan, Marrone, & Foley, 2012).

The 2014 National Survey findings also revealed that over half (32 out of 62) of the SPOC respondents spent 100% of their time on business relations, and the total number of full-time equivalent (FTEs) specialized staff that spend more than 50% of their time on business relations varied widely across agencies. Specifically, for the 45 VR agencies that indicated having specialized business relations staff, a total of over 475 FTEs were reported.

In addition, 10 was the average reported number of FTEs, as indicated in Table 1 below. However, the median number of 5 FTEs may be a more accurate indicator of the average because there were several outliers at the high end of the range, with some agencies reporting more than 50 FTEs. The most commonly reported number of FTEs was 1 FTE (as reported by ten agencies). Furthermore, 75% of reporting agencies have 12 or less FTEs specializing in business relations, as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of VR Agency-Reported Full-time Specialized Business Relations Staff (N = 45)

Mean	10.6	
Median	5.0	
Mode	1.0	
Minimum	1.0	
Maximum	70.0	
Sum	476.5	
Percentiles	25	2.0
	50	5.0
	75	12.0

In addition to the specialized staff and SPOCs, 65 respondents reported that other VR agency staff had business relations 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). Most respondents (n=52) reported that business relations responsibilities were also fulfilled using external resources or staff such as community rehabilitation providers (CRPs).

This survey also provided insights about the backgrounds of individuals serving as the SPOCs in 2014. Overall, many SPOCs reported having a business background (n=29), with experience working in private corporations, small business or in sales. Some SPOCs hold business degrees or have previously owned their own business. Also of note: most SPOCs were not Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs) (n=34 of responding SPOCs). As shown in Figure 2 below, the SPOCs are responsible for carrying out a range of business responsibilities.

Table 2: What were the Reported Top 5 Key Responsibilities of SPOCs?

1. Marketing business services
2. Coordinating services provided to businesses
3. Coordinating a team of staff working with businesses
4. Conduct training for businesses
5. Provide services directly to businesses

In addition, VR agencies indicated there were some basic qualifications business relations staff should possess. Amongst the most common knowledge, skills, and abilities reported as necessary for business relations staff were the following: 1) experience developing effective relationships with businesses (85.9%, 55 of 64), 2) knowledge of business and employment practices (82.8%, 53 of 64), and 3) experience with disability-related issues and solutions in the workplace (82.8%, 53 of 64). These desired qualifications extend beyond traditional VR counseling attributes, and are reflected in [business relations personnel job descriptions](#) developed by state VR agencies.

In addition, although 27 of 62 respondents reported not having training specific to business relations, VR agencies have developed a [number of trainings](#) with content on dual-customer approaches, business terminology, and identifying local labor market opportunities. [View examples of state VR agency trainings for VR staff.](#)

Agency infrastructure: How are VR agencies building their infrastructure to better meet the needs of businesses?

The survey's findings indicate that VR has an infrastructure to serve businesses as customers. VR agencies have made efforts to sustain dual-customer approaches as shown by their staffing patterns, organizational structures, and qualifications of business relations staff (Haines et al., 2018).

Figure 1: Percentage of Agencies with Range of FTEs (N= 45)

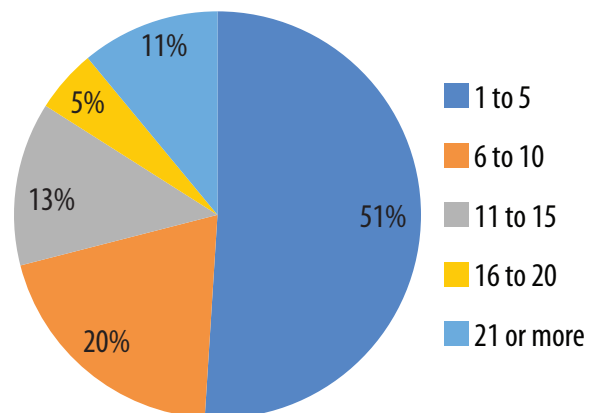


Table 3: Range of FTEs across VR Agencies

Range of Number of FTEs	Number of Agencies
1 to 5	23
6 to 10	9
11 to 15	6
16 to 20	2
21 or more	5

As indicated in Figure 1 and Table 3 above, at the time of the survey administration, 51% (n=23) of VR agency respondents reported having 1 to 5 business relations FTEs. Furthermore, given the ongoing demand for state VR agencies to meet the needs of businesses, agencies across the nation are changing their organizational structure to enhance business service delivery. As observed in the ICI's **technical assistance work with agencies on job-driven initiatives**, VR agencies have attempted to address this need by developing intra-agency business relations units, or by hiring new staff or training in-house staff to be able to develop and maintain relationships with businesses (Allen & Saint Laurent, 2016).

As highlighted in various business engagement models and structures in VR agencies across the nation, these **business relations units** strive to provide a range of services to meet the needs of businesses, such as:

- » Assisting VR counselors in obtaining meaningful employment opportunities for VR job seekers who want to work
- » Identifying and preparing VR consumers in a timely manner in response to employer recruiting needs
- » Building solid relationships and engaging businesses of various industry sectors in collaborative activities to meet their workforce demands and needs
- » Increasing VR agency visibility, knowledge of, and participation in programs to help advance hiring opportunities for people with disabilities
- » Working closely with local workforce development agencies, schools, and community-based organizations to build relationships with employers

For more information on VR agency business engagement models and functions, [visit the Business Engagement Toolkit](#).

Conclusion

A key finding from the survey is that two thirds of state VR agencies nationally employ specialized staff that spend 50% or more of their time on business relations activities. While VR agencies use these internal staff to develop and maintain strong relationships with businesses, there is also an investment in the use of external resources such as community rehabilitation providers for business engagement and employer supports.

The individuals filling the role of SPOC often come from a business background, which may suggest a complementary role to that of VR counselors. The survey results also indicate that VR agencies are using human resources to implement business relations strategies—but there is a wide range of resources and activities across agencies (Haines et al., 2018).

These survey findings are consistent with the ICI's observations providing intensive technical assistance on **business engagement** to state VR agencies through the Job-Driven Technical Assistance Center. VR agencies across the nation are hoping to better define what business relations means for their agencies by their efforts to strategically plan and address:

- » Goals and primary functions of their agencies' business relations models
- » Staff structure of business relations at their agency
- » The role of CRPs and external entities that interface with businesses on behalf of VR clients and agencies
- » The qualifications and experience of staff that hold business relations or SPOC roles
- » Agency approaches to communication about business relations
- » How their agencies incorporate labor market information into business relations activities
- » Business relations data collection and measures of success
- » Challenges their agencies faced throughout the process of structuring business relations units

For more agency examples, [view presentations from a VR business relations forum](#).

This 2014 survey provides a snapshot of business relations staffing patterns as the dual-customer approach continues to be a priority for SVRAs (McDonnall, Crudden, & Zhou, 2013). While most agencies are already providing a number of core services to businesses, the degree to which they are

invested in business relations strategies as a systematized approach to serving the dual customer will require more research and observations on intra-agency practices such as fostering team approaches, integrating communication systems, and encouraging rapid data sharing (Haines et al., 2018).

As the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act has placed great emphasis on VR agencies' responsiveness to business needs on a system-wide level, efforts may increase in the future as agencies continue to implement demand-side and job-driven approaches, enhance their collaboration with workforce partners, and respond to legislation to measure the effectiveness of business relations activities.

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