



Turning Labor Market Facts into Labor Market Information: LMI's Effectiveness for Vocational Rehabilitation

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Introduction

The Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC)¹, Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC), and Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Demand-Side Strategies (RRTC on Demand Side Strategies) jointly formed this Community of Practice (CoP) to understand the effectiveness of **Labor Market Information (LMI)** for VR. This CoP occurred in two cycles. The first cycle of the CoP focused on VR's conceptual use of LMI. The second cycle of this CoP focused on how to turn facts about the labor market into knowledge that can inform VR practice and VR consumers' career development.

This ReviewVR Brief highlights common LMI practices from state VR agencies (SVRAs) that participated in this CoP. The information in this brief comes from CoP discussions and JD-VRTAC and WINTAC technical assistance experience. This brief also features challenges and limitations of LMI, provides recommendations for VR agencies regarding LMI, and offers questions for further consideration. Throughout we reference specific state examples, not necessarily as models to emulate for other states but rather as promising initiatives various state VR agencies have undertaken to meet their own local needs.

Labor Market Information

Labor market information (LMI) is both quantitative and qualitative. It is gathered from a variety of sources and used to inform VR services about employment opportunities for their clients (ExploreVR, LMI Toolkit), as well as to provide occupational information. LMI data are metrics and indicators to describe the supply and demand for labor. These metrics and indicators include unemployment rates, average wages, occupational growth and decline, industry and sector growth and decline, employment projections, and other data that may be very useful for vocational rehabilitation agencies.

During cycle 1 of the CoP¹ many participating state VR agencies (SVRAs) did not yet have systematic ways of obtaining, learning about, understanding, sharing, or using LMI. During part 2 of the CoP,² participating SVRAs were beginning to integrate LMI into work with consumers and businesses. The question remains: **How can VR use facts about the labor market to increase consumer job outcomes?**

Background

LMI and its uses has become a "hot" issue within SVRAs over the last several years. SVRAs have enhanced their focus on LMI as a direct response to the both the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the President's Executive Order on Job Driven Training of January 2014 (**Ready to Work, 2014**). WIOA encourages workforce partners to integrate and align programs through the development of a combined state plan. As part of this plan, states must explain the states' labor market conditions and identify and coordinate business services strategies (**State Plan RSA**). VR is a critical partner.

In 2014, the RRTC on Demand Side Strategies surveyed VR business relations staff to learn how they used LMI. In 2015, the JD-VRTAC conducted focus groups and surveys of SVRA leadership and direct service staff about their LMI needs. The findings from these surveys and focus groups also contributed to the development of this CoP. The RRTC on Demand Side Strategies surveyed VR agencies in 2017 on the changes in their business relations functions including LMI. Data from that survey is forthcoming. **Visit ExploreVR to learn more about these surveys and focus groups.**

As a field, VR can gain insight about the labor market from traditional information sources, like the **Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics**; real-time LMI sources, such as online job postings; and agency business relations sources, gathered by talking directly to businesses about their hiring and

1 Cycle 1: March 2016–December 2016

2 Cycle 2: April 2017–November 2017

training needs ([ExploreVR LMI toolkit](#)). LMI may drive SVRAs' service delivery and policy planning processes to help job seekers with disabilities make informed choices about their careers. According to SVRAs that participated in the CoP, the aspects of LMI most relevant to SVRA personnel include information on job location, projections on which industries may be expanding, and occupational information (e.g., skills, education) that can contribute to a person's career decisions.

One assumption underpinning the emphasis on LMI in WIOA is that it will help businesses, the public sector, and job seekers make better matches between demands for labor and the goals of job seekers. This was the basis of our discussion during this CoP.

Community of Practice

Nine representatives from seven SVRAs self-selected into cycle 1 of this CoP, and 13 representatives from seven other SVRAs self-selected into cycle 2 of this CoP. SVRAs that received technical assistance from the JD-VRTAC and WINTAC were invited to participate in both parts of this CoP. Participating VR agency staff represented various levels and capacities in their agencies, mostly in leadership, management, and business engagement roles. Representatives in the CoP shared responsibility for circulating LMI throughout their agencies. Several staff from the JD-VRTAC and WINTAC TA teams, as well as Demand-Side RRTC researchers, also participated in this CoP.

On monthly calls, CoP members defined topics, shared ideas, and developed strategies for LMI collection, integration, sharing, and use to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Specifically, the CoP discussed accessing different sources of LMI, surveying and training staff on LMI use, incorporating LMI into case management systems, using LMI to develop individual plans for employment, using LMI to enhance business engagement, developing "on-the-ground" sources of LMI, LMI's influence in developing career pathways, increasing LMI's utility across the agency, barriers to using LMI, and sharing LMI with consumers directly.

Staff across the VR agency will use LMI in different capacities.

The Job-Driven [LMI Toolkit Uses page](#) explains LMI-related competencies based on common staff functions.

Participating State VR Agencies

CYCLE 1: EFFECTIVE USE OF LMI

- Delaware Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services
- Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation
- New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation
- Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Rhode Island Office of Rehabilitation Services
- Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

CYCLE 2: TURNING LABOR MARKET FACTS INTO LABOR MARKET INFORMATION

- Arkansas Rehabilitation Services
- Kentucky Office for the Blind
- Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services
- New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
- North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Virginia Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired

VR's Familiarity with LMI

How are SVRAs using LMI?

Most SVRAs that participated in the CoP surveyed their staff about LMI use with consumers and businesses. [Pennsylvania OVR developed a staff survey](#) as part of their JD-VRTAC TA project that several SVRAs adapted for their staff. Survey questions included the following:

- » Do you currently use LMI as part of your vocational planning with VR customers? Why or why not?
- » What type of support would you require to start using labor market information as part of your vocational planning with customers?
- » How often do you incorporate each of the following components of LMI into your vocational planning with [state VR] customers?
- » What resources do you currently use to access LMI for business engagement?
- » What type of support would be helpful in understanding and using LMI as a tool for business engagement?
- » Are you familiar with the [state LMI] website?
- » How often do you access LMI and/or related products from [state LMI] website?

- » Describe the level of difficulty in accessing LMI from [state LMI] website.

Based on the survey responses, many SVRAs developed LMI training. Some focused on training VR counselors specifically, while others provided LMI training to all field staff. Counselors, business engagement staff, supervisors, other field staff, and directors can all benefit from understanding how LMI fits into the VR agency.

Learn more about [Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation LMI Staff Survey and Training](#).

Where does VR get LMI?

VR uses traditional LMI, real-time LMI, and business intelligence to develop strategies for consumer career guidance and business engagement (RRTC, 2014)³. Specifically, SVRAs in the CoP are using real-time LMI tools such as [The Career Index Plus](#) and [O*NET](#), as well as state-specific real-time tools. The Career Index Plus is a comprehensive career information system that allows VR counselors to invite clients to create a profile of their career interests and skills. This tool can help evaluate occupations and make recommendations about careers. Many SVRAs have decided to establish the Career Index Plus as the standard for their agency. RSA contracted with the WINTAC to increase the use of the Career Index Plus in state VR agencies.

Often, the most valuable LMI comes from VR staff talking directly to businesses. Listening to businesses' needs can help VR staff determine upcoming job openings, high-demand career outlooks, position descriptions, job credentials, and other "insider information."

Visit the WINTAC

for examples of SVRA collaborative business engagement practices in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, New Hampshire, Missouri, and Montana.

Read [Hidden Gems: Using "Agency Business Relations LMI" as Part of Your Labor Market Strategy to learn more about business intelligence](#).

Business engagement staff also discuss LMI with workforce partners at local job clubs, One-Stops, community colleges, and workforce board meetings. Sharing job leads and other business intelligence between workforce and VR may help fulfill business needs more efficiently. What VR professionals might think of as simple networking can yield valuable LMI. For example, if a company

is looking for a candidate to fill an immediate job opening, and VR does not have a qualified job candidate available at the time, referring the company to a qualified candidate from the workforce system or a CRP can help build and maintain that long-term VR-employer relationship. VR and Workforce learn agency-generated LMI from each other.

At many VR agencies, business engagement staff meet regularly with VR counselors to share business intelligence and learn about job seekers who are interested in and qualified for in-demand jobs and fields.

Learn how this works at [Virginia Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Demand and Supply Meetings](#).

How does VR use LMI with consumers?

SVRAs, especially post-WIOA, emphasized the importance of introducing LMI to consumers during the vocational planning stage. By discussing labor market conditions with consumers early, counselors can share concrete ideas about job openings, training, and education opportunities available in the region. This may be especially helpful when working with consumers who are not sure about their job goals and who want to remain in the geographic area. LMI can shape a consumer's career direction, but it can also be considered when discussing other life goals and interests, such as family, relocation, hobbies, and education.



In North Dakota, consumers complete individual career assessments to learn more about their interests and skills before discussing LMI with the assessment specialist. The assessment specialist can then share LMI that is relevant to the consumer's interests and skills. In New Hampshire, counselors use LMI to help consumers determine if they will need

³ National Survey of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Business Relations, (2014), RRTC on Demand-Side Strategies, Institute for Community Inclusion.

“Labor market information is so important for helping clients make informed career choices. I watch their eyes light up with anticipation as they learn about transferable skills, education, and what it takes to work within a career lattice, ladder, or bridge. Researching career goals through LMI helps give clients the power to see into the future.”

—**Sheri Ann Whitmire, North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation**

any training or education to match their job goals. In Arkansas, the business engagement staff and counselor meet with the consumer together to share LMI and develop individualized employment plans.

Learn more about how North Dakota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation uses LMI with Consumers.

How does VR use LMI to engage businesses?

Based on LMI, SVRAs in this CoP are developing sector strategies and career pathways programs. Staff engage businesses that fit consumers’ interests and match growth sectors.

The Kentucky Office for the Blind (KOFB) received a **Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities (CPID) Model Demonstration** to target five growth industries: 1) Healthcare, 2) Business/Information Technology, 3) Construction, 4) Transportation/Logistics, and 5) Advanced Manufacturing. Using LMI, KOFB targets businesses in these specific fields. VR Career Pathways Coordinators work in concert with counselors in schools to teach transitioning students about careers in these industries.

KOFB, Virginia Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VDBVI), Delaware DVR, and other agencies partner with community colleges to develop training programs based on career pathway industries.

In Virginia, each Workforce Development Board produces an annual plan, which includes the top five growth industries in the state, their projected growth, the top 50 employers in the state, barriers to filling the employment gaps, and other valuable LMI. At VDBVI, the Career Pathways Project Coordinator reviews this detailed report and shares a summary with business engagement staff and VR counselors. Business engagement staff can target outreach to these specific industries and employers.

Arkansas Rehabilitation Services hosts business summits and panels to hear from businesses in growing sectors across the state. VR district managers, counselors, and business engagement staff collectively develop business action plans, which use LMI to improve business engagement based on regional demographics.

When VR integrates LMI with career counseling and business engagement, VR may increase quality placement outcomes and reduce the number of job-seekers returning to VR.

SVRAs in this CoP have demonstrated two general areas of focus for LMI: the use of O*Net-based systems and other national search engines, and the “home-grown” labor market and job information. State-level strategies can aim to integrate the use of both areas. This integration helps counselors to support individuals in meeting their career objectives, and is believed to enhance overall customer and system outcomes. In other words, the combination of quality national and local information, strategically available to service professionals, enhances job seeker and business outcomes.

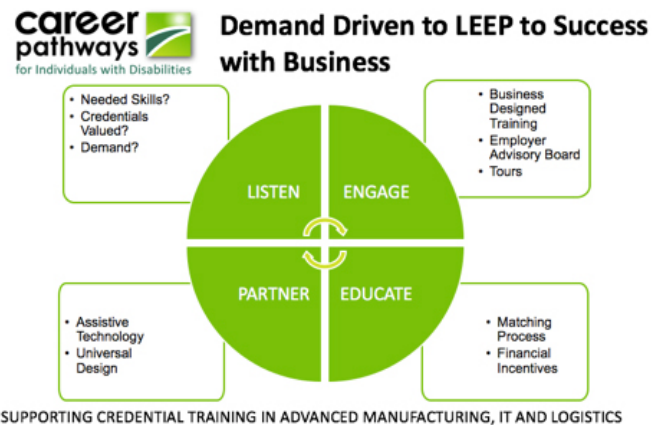
Challenges

Any system that seeks to obtain employment for its clients must be well aware of the labor market in which it functions. However, the ability to use LMI effectively presents ongoing dilemmas in VR.

VR Consumer as the Primary Customer

The field of VR is governed by a person-centric approach to vocational decision-making and supports, before moving outward to the job market at large. Vocational choice assistance cannot be divorced from LMI, but for VR, the main goal is to help consumers achieve broad life goals supported through employment, rather than fitting them into any specific short-term employment boom.

The VR approach contrasts with a workforce development system that focuses on economic development and labor force needs. Furthermore,



while SVRAs serve large numbers of people, their total “output” of workers is tiny in comparison to the enormous size of the US labor market.

Finally, deciding which part of the labor market one references geographically (local, regional, national) or temporally (now, next 5 years, next 10 years) varies from client to client and industry to industry.

Limited Evidence of LMI's Effectiveness

In terms of using occupational information on a client level, even though the goal of LMI is to buttress informed choice within client decision-making, there is no clear evidence about how LMI does influence any person's vocational choice. Certainly, there are anecdotal stories of clients coming in to VR seeking such information to make their own life decisions. For example, people may use sites like O*NET to get information on training requirements for a given occupation. But the overall field of vocational counseling has not offered substantial data to link better LMI with either increased use of VR services or more appropriate employment choices by people with disabilities.

Rapid Pace of the Labor Market

Two conundrums that VR counselors face in using LMI are the pace at which the labor market itself changes, and balancing the realities of the labor market with clients' aspirations. Given the speed of change in today's economic and job environment, it is not always easy to decide whether even real-time LMI is current or stable enough to use confidently.

Who Manages LMI?

There are also more practical administrative concerns attendant to effective use of LMI within SVRAs. One problem is how to compile the various levels of LMI that may become available: that gathered by state and national Departments of Labor and/ or Economic Development, “on the ground” data generated



through personal staff knowledge, formal reports, newspaper stories, meetings of local agencies, and various real-time technologies.

Associated with this concern is the matter of who should be responsible for gathering such data. And when gathered, how is it most effectively disseminated to both staff and clients? Having a dedicated staffer responsible for these activities is ideal, but not always feasible. Also, even if there is a staffer dedicated to LMI management, there is still an expectation that local VR counselors will get access to it and be able to use it as needed, which would put additional pressure on the dedicated LMI staff.

LMI's Limited Contribution in the Vocational Decision-making Process

Vocational decision making is a more complex process than “Tell me what is available and what I can do, and then I will pick something.” These sorts of choices are impacted by a multitude of factors such as family ties, interests, finances, social supports, peer group pressure, societal expectations, culture, age, race, gender, and personal aspirations.

There are also other factors that contribute to job placement outcomes, besides LMI. These include client motivation, concerns about impact of employment on public benefits, willingness to relocate, family support, job seeker skills, job search abilities, local transportation, need for assistive technology or accommodations, and discrimination.

Sustainability

Since the advent of WIOA and its emphasis on LMI use, many SVRAs have spent money and time to train staff on using LMI. At the same time, the Rehabilitation Services Administration has invested in the development of a user-friendly LMI tool, The Career Index Plus, essentially packaging information available through O*NET in a more accessible way.

Additionally, many state departments of labor, workforce, and economic development have web-based real-time LMI portals with varying degrees of utility. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development has an especially user-friendly and relevant portal. Commercial vehicles developed through entities such as Monster.com and Burning Glass also offer real-time LMI databases.

The problem remains of how to maintain knowledge and expertise in LMI use after the initial training, as well as how to account for personnel turnover and the need for continuing education in this area.

Solutions

For the reasons listed prior, and partially for the fact that the VR mandate stems from the person's needs before looking outward, VR counselors and clients face the prospect of dealing with contradictory needs (person's wishes vs current labor market). VR staff must balance the ethical demands of honest feedback with the competing values of fostering hope and supporting dreams within their clients.

Recommendations for VR

- Develop a complete set of recommendations for VR counselors about expectations for how staff should use the various types of LMI
- Provide resources to staff on ways to effectively access and understand the respective utility of various types of LMI
- Ensure there is a dedicated staff position responsible for gathering and disseminating regularly relevant sources of LMI
- Provide clinical training to staff on using LMI as a vehicle to expand people's options, hopes, and dreams rather than as a barrier to inhibit them.
- Use LMI as a tool to develop VR sponsored training programs for clients that meet an emerging labor market demand
- Develop a method for internal Business Outreach Units to respond rapidly to changing labor market and employer needs.
- Ensure that Business Outreach Units do not engage with the local labor markets without an understanding of the client needs that exist within local offices
- Create a data system for tracking use and impact of LMI dissemination within SVRAs
- Ensure that any agency wide LMI generated involves Economic Development data as well as job availability information
- Collaborate with local and state workforce systems to get easy access to LMI they regularly generate.
- Develop models of collaborative engagement (with Core and Required Partners, as identified in Title I of WIOA) with businesses and business sector boards to respond to business needs together, and create stronger common sources of state and local level LMI. This strengthens the collective business response as well as the shared investment in Career Pathway models.

Thinking more Deeply about LMI – Questions for Consideration

- What do we know about how LMI would influence career choice at different phases of a career: early, re-entry, mid, late?
- What other influences besides LMI should staff be concerned with in helping consumers make job and career choices?
- How do we sustain staff knowledge and skills in LMI use?
- To what extent should VR counselors be gatekeepers of primary sources of LMI vs helping clients access this store of data directly?
- Are there different ways that various disabilities impact use of LMI by VR counselors and or clients?
- How can SVRAs most efficiently (both cost and staff time) collect and disseminate LMI?
- How should we expect Business Outreach Units and/ or VR counselors to use LMI to manage their work and use of time?
- How does a VR agency develop the capacity to create customized, agency sponsored training in responding to changing LMI?
- How can SVRAs maximize their ability to access sources of LMI that public or CRP partners hold?
- What sorts of metrics should SVRAs use in assessing the impact of LMI use on agency and jobseeker outcomes?
- To what degree should SVRAs engage the expertise of their workforce partners to support stronger use of the available LMI to establish more responsive career services in the American Job Centers for all job seekers?

Visit [ExploreVR's job-driven toolkit on Labor Market Information](#) for additional tools and resources about LMI.

¹ The JD-VRTAC aims to identify, adapt, embed, and sustain job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR) that lead to improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The JD-VRTAC collaborates in the research and training efforts of the RRTC on Demand-Side Strategies, which aims to improve the VR system's capacity to respond to employers' needs. The WINTAC provides technical assistance to state VR agencies to "develop skills and processes needed to meet the requirements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)."

Explore VR

Informing Research, Policy, and Practice



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