

# Developing a VR Pipeline for Paid Work Experiences: VR Candidate Identification and Preparation

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*The Job-Driven Toolkits contain resources on promising and emerging job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR).*

Paid work experiences such as pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, and internships can lead to increased numbers of individuals with disabilities who meet the demand for rapidly expanding career fields while earning higher wages. For job seekers who face barriers to employment, vocational rehabilitation (VR) can offer paid work experiences that lead to education and credential attainment to better meet business needs.

According to the Department of Labor's website on Registered Apprenticeships, the average starting salary for an apprentice is \$15.00 per hour, well above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. Apprentices can earn higher wages upon completion of a 3- or 4-year apprenticeship, earning up to \$26.36 per hour (ODEP, 2015).

Through candidate identification and preparation, marketing and outreach, and pipeline development, VR can position itself as a source of talent that meets the needs of employers. Developing a

VR talent pool nationwide is key to helping more individuals with disabilities achieve better employment and earnings outcomes through paid work experience programs.

The need for skilled workers continues to rise faster than the supply of workers in the United States job market.<sup>1</sup> Weaknesses in skill level also affect businesses' ability to recruit and retain a productive workforce. This presents an opportunity for VR to match the right candidates with the right jobs.

VR programs must explore some preliminary questions in the early stages of developing a pipeline for paid work experiences:

- » What is the basis for the belief that clients need and want these services?
- » What caseload management processes will support a referral flow for a VR pipeline?
- » Will current methods for identifying candidates accurately predict placements?

In VR agency settings, communication from counselors to consumers is critical for candidate identification and preparation on a state and nationwide level. When responding to the need for qualified candidates, the point of contact needs timely information from VR counselors about consumers who are ready and able to begin working. VR programs should also develop agency-wide mechanisms to inform VR counselors about paid work experiences and keep them involved throughout the referral process.

In addition, it is vital to clarify counselors' expectations for paid work experience referrals, and to involve them as key players in disseminating information statewide about available paid work experiences and what consumers need to be successful in employment and training programs.

## Finding the Right Candidates

Identifying the candidates who are the right fit for a job depends on the skills required for the position and whether the particular paid work experience is a good fit for the consumer.

<sup>1</sup> (Rauner & Smith, 2010; Lerman, Eyster, & Chambers, 2009)

Start by identifying key skills that could make or break the candidate's success in short- or long-term programs. Matching skill sets required for a position and aligning them with the interests and abilities of the consumer is key to a successful placement.

Though specific skill sets vary by trade or occupation, most programs develop baseline requirements that VR agencies can take note of when pre-screening or determining the eligibility of viable candidates. For example, the [Building Pathways Apprenticeship Program in Massachusetts](#) prepares low- to moderate-income urban youth, women, people of color, and individuals with disabilities to enter into a registered apprenticeship construction career program. The program provides classroom and hands-on instruction, and field trips to apprenticeship training centers and active construction sites.

The baseline requirements for construction career candidates in the Building Pathways Apprenticeship Program are:

- » Interest in construction career
- » Able to perform physically challenging work in weather extremes
- » 18 years of age at start of training
- » High school diploma or GED; aptitude tests for some trades
- » Must have a car or means of transportation to job sites in locations across the region
- » Drug-free and able to pass a drug test
- » Can understand courses taught in English



## Preparing Candidates for Success

A number of assessments look at potential candidates' skills. However, training programs are more effective in allowing participants to demonstrate their ability to succeed in a particular job, industry, or work environment. Pre-apprenticeship, occupational, and soft skill programs are training models that VR can use to help prepare candidates for success in long-term career and employment opportunities.

Pre-apprenticeship training programs are used with VR consumers to focus on candidate preparation to enter into a specific career field or industry. While candidates may be interested in securing employment, they may need to first improve their soft skills such as communication, work ethic, and attitude. In addition to their soft skill development, training programs improve candidates' aptitude in their chosen trade or occupation, while developing a work history with transferable skills. Figure 1 outlines the key components of quality pre-apprenticeship programs.

**FIGURE 1. KEY COMPONENTS OF QUALITY PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS**



(Source: Jobs for the Future)

For example, Arkansas Career Training Institute (ACTI) provides vocational training and services that lead to employment opportunities for students served by Arkansas Rehabilitation Services. Students are

referred to ACTI for evaluation, training, and placement by VR counselors located in field offices serving each county in the state.

One ACTI student described his experience and what he learned in the pre-apprenticeship program: “My goal is to put my best foot forward and never give up. I felt that with additional experience from this program, I would be well ahead of the competition. I learned that my interpersonal skills and strong work ethic also shows my desire to be somebody.”

**Occupational skills training (OST) programs** help candidates develop specific skills in their vocation of choice. The training programs lead to a certificate or set of skills recognized by employers, making engagement with businesses vital to program success.

OST can be established based on multiple models and can be initiated by various entities—for example, a community college, large employer, or a VR program. These partners can create a set of training objectives and a training plan that is aligned with the standards of the industry. Skills assessment prior to apprenticeships prepares candidates for success.

Occupational skills training:

- » is outcome-oriented and focused on a vocational goal specific to the employment strategy for the individual VR consumer.
- » is of sufficient duration to impart the skills needed to meet the vocational goal.
- » leads to the attainment of a recognized postsecondary credential.

The decision to use OST as a training activity should be based upon VR consumers’ desires and goals as identified in their vocational plans and should include an analysis of [labor market information](#). Training should be in occupations shown to be in demand in the geographic area where employment is desired.

**FIGURE 2. WHY IS LMI USEFUL FOR VR?**

<b>Demand Driven</b>	• <b>OUTCOMES:</b> Match client interests with in-demand occupational and careers
<b>Client Education and Training</b>	• <b>OUTCOMES:</b> Align client learning outcomes to identified occupational skill and qualification requirements
<b>Employer Engagement</b>	• <b>OUTCOMES:</b> Spur and enhance conversations with employers for enhanced business support and anecdotal information
<b>Strategic, Tactical, &amp; Administration Planning</b>	• <b>OUTCOMES:</b> A resource for strategic planning and implementation including staff trainings, grant and program development, data for tracking client support and outcomes

(Source: Jobs for the Future)

As labor market conditions vary widely, VR staff should use informed sources to help the consumer determine the outlook for a given occupation. Since permanent employment is an expected outcome, the participant should be actively involved in the planning of their training enrollment and long-term career goals.

Learn more about [exploring labor market opportunities with VR consumers](#).

**Soft skills training** focuses on the client's development in areas that will help them succeed in workplace settings, such as emotional intelligence, time management, and business etiquette. Training programs can vary depending on if they are designed for blue collar (construction and manufacturing) or white collar (office, retail, customer service) tracks. However, soft skills development is vital to success in any employment program.

According to a [youth work readiness curriculum developed by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Policy](#), there are 6 key areas of soft skill development:

- » Communication
- » Enthusiasm and attitude
- » Teamwork
- » Networking
- » Problem solving and critical thinking
- » Professionalism

## VR Pipeline Development: Key Takeaways

Identifying the right candidates and preparing them for success is key for the VR program to remain a source of talent for employers. There are many options to help candidates develop the technical skills they need, such as pre-apprenticeships, occupational skills trainings, and soft skills trainings. However, many VR programs across the nation have recognized some key lessons in developing a viable pipeline of candidates who are likely to obtain and maintain paid work experiences.

When developing a VR pipeline of candidates for paid work experience programs:

- » Implement measures and procedures for the screening of soft skills. Soft skill development is key to consumers' success in many work environments.
- » Pay attention to the timing of training programs based on when employers or industry sectors are most likely to hire. Consumers should feel empowered to make informed career choices based on timely information about current occupational trends and labor market information.
- » Customize your programs to fit the needs of businesses. Involve employers in the development of programs to increase likelihood for placements and longevity.



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