

Technical Brief 11

Results From a Study of Knowledge Brokering Among Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Business Consultants

Overview

The Center on Knowledge Translation for Employment Research (KTER Center; <http://www.kter.org>) at the American Institutes for Research, which is funded by the National Institute for Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, tested a knowledge broker model in vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency settings. Knowledge brokers are individuals positioned to bridge the worlds of research and practice (Long et al., 2013). Through several other studies, the KTER Center implemented this model by training VR staff on how to engage in the knowledge broker role on relevant topics, including preemployment transition services and adult learning. (See [KTER Technical Brief 10](#) for results from these related studies.) This brief focuses on the KTER Center's work with VR agency business points of contact who belonged to the National Employment Team ([the NET](#)) headed by Kathy West-Evans of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the KTER Center's partner.

The NET, an initiative made up of VR business consultants who operate as single points of contact for the businesses with which they work, exists to improve working relationships and marketing effectiveness with businesses (Haines et al., 2018). NET members function as business consultants in support of the dual-customer approach to VR, where VR agencies consider businesses as customers, which is similar to how people with disabilities are treated as customers (Haines et al., 2018). NET members work with various companies and industries, including large-scale businesses and industry leaders in the retail, health, and technology sectors. Each of the 78 state VR agencies has at least one NET representative specifically tasked with outreach to businesses.

Methods

The study activities involved conducting a scoping review of research studies about VR business engagement, developing and administering a training for NET members based on the scoping review results, and conducting follow-up calls with the training participants to determine the usefulness of the training for their work. The team worked closely not only with CSAVR but also with a Technical Working Group of advisors who were other disability employment researchers and VR professionals.

Informational Needs-Sensing Activities

As a first step, KTER Center researchers conducted surveys and focus groups with NET members and the businesses with which they work to determine the most pressing knowledge needs for both NET members and their business clients. The survey results indicated the most important topics for NET members (e.g., outreach communication strategies) and businesses working with VR agencies (e.g., recruiting applicants with disabilities).

Scoping Review to Address Identified Informational Needs

Using these results, KTER Center researchers then conducted a scoping review on the identified topics. A scoping review is a literature review that uses a protocol with predefined search strings for a given set of databases to identify and map out existing research studies, providing a broad and replicable overview of a topic (see Aromataris & Munn, 2020). The team examined literature from 1988 through December 31, 2020, that, in addition to being relevant to the topics of interest, met other eligibility criteria (e.g., training related, focused on disability employment). After two members of the KTER research team screened the titles and abstracts of 530 records (527 records from the database search and three records Technical Working Group members suggested), they excluded 377 records. Next, four KTER researchers conducted independent reviews to extract data from the full text of the remaining 153 articles to assess their eligibility for inclusion per the scoping review inclusion/exclusion criteria. Of these 153 full text articles, 59 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included, whereas 94 articles did not meet eligibility criteria and were excluded.

Intervention Design and Development: Training and Monthly Check-Ins

The results from the scoping review informed the content of a training on business outreach that the KTER Center developed. The center collaborated with CSAVR and the VR Development Group, which provided practitioner-related training content (e.g., practical tips for effective outreach, alternatives to VR jargon). Linda Hedenblad of the VR Development Group narrated the training so that it would have a practitioner-oriented guide throughout all four 15-minute modules. The titles of the modules are as follows: *Recognizing the Importance of Business Relationships*, *Establishing Business Relationships*, *Communicating Value to Businesses*, and *Responding to Challenges and Tracking Success*. Each module had a learning check for participants to test their knowledge and a resource sheet for the full training course was available for download.

The KTER Center also invited NET member training recipients to participate in up to 6 months of follow-up calls with a KTER Center researcher. The purpose of the calls was twofold: (a) to identify ways in which the training was useful to NET members' daily interactions with businesses and (b) to ask how the KTER Center might continue to support NET members' work.

Study Sample and Baseline Data Collection From NET Members and Business Representatives

NET members ($N = 80$) from all 78 state VR agencies were invited to participate in the study. The enrollment form included a baseline survey about respondents' familiarity and value of evidence-based information and VR service provision. On the enrollment survey, NET member participants also shared contact information for up to three business representatives with whom they worked. Sharing this information was required to participate in the study. In the initial round of enrollment, participants from eight states ($n = 8$) were randomly assigned at the state level to training ($n = 4$) or control ($n = 4$). Participants who enrolled after the initial round ($n = 6$, bringing total enrollment to 14 participants) were assigned to the same group (training or control) as their colleague(s) from that state who participated in the initial round of enrollment. Four of the six enrollees were from states with previously enrolled participants assigned to the training group, so they were assigned to the training group, bringing the total training group to eight

individuals. The remaining two enrollees were from states with previously enrolled participants assigned to the control group, so they were assigned to the control group, bringing the total control group to six individuals. During the study, however, two training participants dropped out because of job reassignment or retirement, and one training participant did not take the training and was disqualified, ultimately resulting in a larger control group ($n = 6$) than the training group ($n = 5$).

The KTER Center also administered a different survey to representatives of businesses with whom NET members reported working. That survey collected data regarding which VR services the business knew about and used plus their level of satisfaction with the provision of those services. Thirteen of the 27 business representatives invited submitted baseline surveys.

Study Implementation

Study participants assigned to the training group completed the four 15-minute training modules at the suggested pace of one module per week. At the start of the training, a KTER Center researcher contacted the training participants to provide information about the study goals and training process. Then, during the next 3–6 months, the researcher conducted one follow-up call per month with each participant to gauge the training's effectiveness (i.e., how useful it was in the participants' daily interactions with businesses). During these calls, the researcher asked probing questions and captured notes on the conversation. The number of months in which follow-up calls took place varied by participant according to when they enrolled in the study and their availability for the calls.

Follow-Up Data Collection

At the end of the study, the KTER Center invited enrolled participants (both training and control) and the business representatives who submitted baseline surveys to complete a postsurvey. KTER Center researchers compared the NET members' presurvey responses ($n = 14$; eight training and six control) to their postsurvey responses ($n = 6$; four training and two control), as well as the business representatives' presurvey ($n = 13$; nine referred by training participants and four referred by control participants) and postsurvey ($n = 8$; five referred by training participants and three referred by control participants) responses. The researchers

also identified common themes and patterns within the survey results, notes from follow-up calls, and across the responses that NET members and business representatives shared.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

Low survey response rates and inconsistent pre-post survey completion (i.e., respondents completed the baseline survey only) prohibited inferential statistical analysis. However, a few observations regarding the NET member baseline survey results are worth noting. NET member respondents generally rated themselves highly (usually or always) in terms of VR service provision and effectiveness. None rated greater than sometimes for this question: “In the last 3 months, how often did you find it difficult to work with business representatives because you did not understand their business language or they did not understand your vocational rehabilitation language?” This response pattern suggests that, prior to taking the training, NET members already felt confident about their level of service provision, and they communicated with businesses effectively.

The business surveys also had low pre-post survey completion, making analysis of the results difficult. Anecdotally, KTER Center researchers identified one state where the business representatives differed significantly in their satisfaction ratings, such that one respondent rated services provided by the VR point of contact highly (i.e., very satisfied) and the other business representative rated those services poorly (i.e. very dissatisfied). Although it is not possible to conclude definitively without further data, the extreme difference in ratings suggests that satisfaction might be driven by some other factor, not with the VR services directly. Because relationships are the basis of business engagement, we should consider whether these differences may arise from satisfaction with the VR representatives themselves (e.g., personal characteristics). If effective provision of VR service depends to some extent on the personal characteristics of individual VR staff, how replicable is it? This potential for inconsistency from one relationship to the next may lead to considerations about selecting/hiring VR staff in these roles (e.g., skills and personal characteristics needed) and the potential impact on succession planning.

Follow-Up Call Results

Although the survey findings revealed limited information, qualitative data gathered from the follow-up calls offered additional insight, including challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the practical needs of VR staff who work with businesses. We highlight a few themes and excerpts from these calls in the sidebar and sections that follow.

Impacts of COVID-19 on Business

Outreach. Despite limitations expressed by the participants to their implementation of the training because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants described innovative recruiting and hiring practices occurring in their states, such as virtual job fairs. One participant stated that the exclusive use of virtual communication during the pandemic decreased the opportunities for high-fidelity communication, such as in-person site visits. Several participants expressed a desire to improve virtual communication with businesses.

Business Engagement Knowledge

Refreshing. Study participants confirmed the helpfulness of being reminded about business engagement strategies, both through the training modules and the follow-up calls. Several participants felt the training on tracking metrics had been helpful and wanted to see more training or information on this topic in the future.

Highlights From Follow-Up Calls With the Training Participants

Impacts of COVID-19 on Business Outreach

- “[The calls were helpful], except COVID has shut everything down and limited my ability to apply things. It would have been much better in other times. I couldn’t move forward with the information as much.”
- “Most employers are doing little hiring or no hiring right now. And they aren’t communicating when they lay off our contacts. The good news is working from home is becoming feasible for some of our clients that need it.”
- “We are shifting in communication style . . . things have been quiet right now. However, as things are starting up again, we are moving to virtual communication (e.g., WebEx, calls) to keep [businesses] engaged. We’ve had a regional virtual job fair over the last 3 days.”

Business Engagement Knowledge Refreshing

- [The KTER training was] “a good refresher, especially Module 4 [*Responding to Challenges and Tracking Success*]. It was most meaningful because our team has been doing this for 7 years, and we keep improving over time.”
- “[The KTER calls] kept [business engagement] in the forefront of my mind . . . having the call functioned as a reminder. I would pull up my notes and think about what I’ve done in the last 30 days and how the modules apply to what I’m doing.”

Need for Tools

- “I’ve used these [KTER follow-up calls] for tools and guidance to approaching business outreach in the future.”
- “Tracking has been a barrier for [our state] because our workforce partners have their own tracking systems. WIOA [The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act] wants us to report numbers as a state, but this is difficult when different groups use different software systems that don’t talk to each other. It’s really just trial and error. We don’t have the tools.”
- “If businesses fear that [providing accommodations] might cost money, they shy away from it. Tips or tools around how to relieve their fears would be helpful.” We don’t have the tools.”

Business Engagement Knowledge Refreshing, cont. Study participants confirmed the helpfulness of being reminded about business engagement strategies, both through the training modules and the follow-up calls. Several participants felt the training on tracking metrics had been helpful and wanted to see more training or information on this topic in the future.

Need for Tools. Several participants brought up the importance of tracking metrics for reporting purposes and found Module 4 (*Responding to Challenges and Tracking Success*) especially useful. They also expressed an interest in learning more about what other states are using, such as metrics software or resources and best practices for communicating with businesses during this unusual time.

Limitations

The timing of this study bears mention, given the events unfolding at the time. The 2020 global pandemic with COVID-19 began near the time of recruitment for this study and may have contributed to low response rates, perhaps because of uncertainty or work assignment changes. Several NET members enrolled in the study were reassigned from their regular role of working with businesses to processing unemployment claims, for example. Reassignment caused these participants either to drop out the study or pause participation for several months while experiencing this temporary role change.

The pandemic also impacted how much opportunity NET members had to work with businesses during the study (e.g., business closures or hiring freezes), thereby limiting the utility of the training content during the study's implementation period. The less need that businesses had for VR services, the less business outreach NET members conducted and the fewer opportunities they had to apply the study's training on business outreach. As such, study participants stated that there was limited application of the training and little to discuss in some follow-up calls.

Next Steps

Given the questions about information sharing, we hope to see additional tools and resources shared with the field at large. To that end, now that this study has concluded, the KTER Center has released the training modules to extend beyond

the study participants. [These modules](#) and the accompanying [resources sheet](#) are available to the public. Follow-up calls with the study participants revealed gaps in VR staff's access to tools and resources for tracking metrics, and these gaps varied across states. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates adjustments to VR-business engagement practices. Participants expressed a desire to improve virtual communication with businesses and discover new ways to deliver effective business outreach. Although these requests go beyond the scope of the present study, future endeavors by VR researchers and practitioners should attempt to address them. Future studies also may consider the potential relationship between the personal characteristics of VR staff and the identification of characteristics that may contribute to higher levels of satisfaction from the businesses that work with VR agencies.

References

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