

# The Basics of Engaging the Business Customer

By Rick Kugler & Randall Wilson

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



The current demographic of the labor force may create a unique opportunity for workers with disabilities. Labor market forecasts predict a need of an additional 11.5 million workers by 2026 (BLS, 2017). However, while labor needs increase, the aging out of baby boomers will create a labor shortfall, which some predict to be 10 million workers by 2020 (LinkedIn, 2015). Given the current labor force participation rate of people with disabilities at approximately 33% (nTIDE/Kessler foundation, 2017), this means that there is a large, untapped labor pool that can fill needed positions. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies are poised to introduce job applicants who have disabilities to help meet these shortages. Whether you are part of your state's VR agency and directly engaging employers, or you are contracting these services out to providers, all VR professionals must be willing to understand the culture of business and their labor needs, and to communicate with them in their own language.

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If your work experience has mainly been in human services, education, or rehabilitation, the idea of canvassing the business community to develop job placements for the clients you serve may feel uncomfortable at first. The not-for-profit world often has a culture that may be very different from the mainstream business community. But despite these differences, VR services and the clients you refer can represent real value to the labor force and the businesses.

This brief will introduce you to business engagement concepts, and help you develop a business-serving mindset as you pursue opportunities for the clients you serve.

Let's start with key principles. To develop successful relationships with businesses, and thereby help your clients to become employed, you'll need to see the relationship from the business's point of view. Frequently, VR staff and Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) use the term "employer" when they talk about businesses to whom they refer their clients for jobs. In reality, businesses don't exist to "employ" people, but rather, to prosper with the products and/or services they provide. So to engage businesses, you'll need to show your interest in their product or service, and in their bottom line.

Next, think beyond making individual job placements, and focus on developing ongoing relationships in the business community. The success of your business engagement efforts will depend on your ability to treat businesses as your valued customers, rather than as just "employers." You work to meet their needs, just as you work to meet the needs of the clients who come to you for services.

This approach is more than a philosophy—it is required under federal law. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) emphasizes the need for VR services to both support the seeker with a disability in obtaining competitive employment, and to address the needs of businesses. This is sometimes referred to as the "dual customer approach."

In addition, WIOA requires that VR agencies track their outcomes on behalf of their connections to businesses. These outcomes include employer retention, repeat customers, and labor market penetration. This means that meeting the needs of your clients and the business community that employs them is crucial.



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## What's the right way to treat a customer?

What is it like when you are a customer? What are your expectations when you approach businesses for their products or services? The way you rate your experience is how you decide who you do business with. Different people may emphasize some qualities over others, but there are some values that most people would likely agree on.

When you are talking with a service representative, you want to be treated respectfully and feel that you've been listened to; you feel better when you know you've been understood. You want a business to be reliable and to deliver on its promises. You may not necessarily purchase your item or need a service every time you shop/visit, but if you feel valued by the organization, at some point you probably will return. This is how a lasting relationship develops.

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Sometimes the exchange doesn't work out as planned. Even if we're not satisfied with a particular experience, we feel better if the vendor takes steps to "make it right." We are more likely to continue with that relationship.

These are aspects of customer service to keep in mind as you connect to your local businesses. Delivering on these principles of reliability and respect will let you develop partnerships that will yield placements and other opportunities for the job seekers you serve.

VR services are designed to help job seekers with disabilities to pursue their career interest. Their outcomes will often depend on the employment opportunities available to them in the community. The employment exploration process can start with a job placement, on-the-job training, internship, job shadowing, etc., and you'll need to partner with businesses to create these opportunities for job seekers. You will need to have satisfied business customers in order to create these opportunities.

## Speaking the same language

Before you get started developing customers, ask yourself if you are speaking their language. Every industry has its own jargon, including ours. We use acronyms and descriptive terms, often more clinical in nature, using disability terminology. But describing the aspects of disability or the array of services you provide clients can be complex and sometimes confusing. Sometimes it's just "too much information." In other cases, too much focus on disability issues may create apprehension.

The specific symptoms a client has or services they receive are not relevant to the employer's primary interest: the health and growth of their company. If you do need to address the issue of disability on behalf of a specific situation, use terms that relate to function ("needs some additional training to use that device") rather than diagnosis or impairment ("dyspraxia"). To engage the business customer, use language that is functional, pragmatic, and relates to usable skills.

Focus on the benefits of working with VR (access to a talent pool of skilled and motivated candidates) rather than the features of the VR process. Businesses want to know if the person can do the job, and the services a job seeker receives are just the means to that end.

**How do we make change? How do we build trust? We need to look at the fact that this [client] is "talent." We're not marketing disabilities.**

*—Kathy West-Evans,  
Director of Business Relations, Council of State  
Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation*

Avoid acronyms (OJT, VR, ISP, etc.) and human service terms (placement, braiding services, work incentives). Instead, give concrete information about skills, qualifications, certifications, training needs, other satisfied business customers, etc.

For example, some of your business partners may relate to the term "workplace modification" more readily than "reasonable accommodation." Rather than saying that a job seeker has "cognitive challenges" or "organizational problems," explain that he or she "works better when using a task list."

**Read the following introductory statements. Which do you think would most resonate with a potential business customer: this?**

We provide vocational rehabilitation to services people with disabilities. Our clients receive a variety of services including counseling, restorative services, training, job development, etc. We are looking to develop integrated employment placements in community settings to help our clients enter the workforce. We may be able to provide job coaching and other ongoing supports to help our clients succeed.

**Or this?**

Our agency works with both businesses and job seekers to connect qualified candidates with employment opportunities in the community. We have access to a large labor pool. We screen our clients, and we can provide training and other services to prepare them for job opportunities. We also provide services to businesses to help them expand, diversify and promote employee retention.

For a business owner, can you see how the second example would show much more powerfully that the VR agency has the employer's interests in mind?

While you may see yourself providing human services, in the business relations context, think of yourself in terms of "human resources." Remember, VR agencies offer what businesses need. While your goal is helping people with disabilities who want to work, referring a qualified candidate is an asset to a business. It's one you can help provide.

**Asking the right questions**

Be prepared and succinct when you are discussing a business's needs. Start by doing your homework. Learn about their products and services and their work processes before you meet with them. If you show a basic understanding of what they do and ask relevant questions, they'll feel more confident in working with your agency.

Once you understand what they do and how they do it, find how they hire to get the work done. Some key questions include:

- » What do they look for in a candidate? Have them describe a good employee.
- » Do they have a regular demand for entry-level employees or other specific positions?
- » What level of skills and/or experience are candidates expected to have?
- » What types of training or educational background do most of their good hires have? Do they require specific credentials?
- » Do their staffing needs follow any kind of a pattern, or is hiring cyclical?
- » What are their workforce challenges? Do they have shortages related to a particular skill set or high-turnover positions? Are there any sets of tasks or duties that they have trouble getting done in their organization?
- » How do they generally recruit? Where have they had their best luck recruiting?
- » What is their hiring process?
- » What does success look like in their organization? What does a career ladder look like?

**What the answers reveal**

Asking good questions will help you create a profile of the business. Determine what they value in different positions and the desired skill sets and experience.

If there are hard-to-fill positions or undone tasks, find out what skills it might take to fill these gaps. Sometimes people with certain disabilities may not fit directly in a position the way it is structured. You may be able to help a hiring manager solve a productivity problem by carving out or creating a position, resulting in a new job description with a distinct set of tasks that a client can perform and excel at.

You will likely encounter businesses that may not have open positions, or you may not have candidates to fill any positions that are open at given time. Remind them that at some point that will change. Talk with your contact about a strategy to stay in touch. Let them know that this information you've collected will prepare you to bring the right talent to them, when they are hiring. Encourage them to inform other businesses in their network of the services you can provide them.

## Ways to be nimble and responsive

Business moves at a faster speed than VR (you've heard the saying "time is money," right?). Be aware of this as you respond to phone calls and emails: a prompt reply will help build your credibility. Maintaining awareness of your client talent pool also will help you fill needs as they arise and respond to them in a timely way.

Familiarize yourself with your local labor market information (LMI). It will help you understand the economic climate that the businesses you deal with operate in. It may help stimulate conversation with business partners by testing your understanding of labor market needs against their experiences, for example, "I've been reading that there's a high demand these days for nursing assistants. Would you say that's true at your clinic?"

Knowledge of LMI also may help you anticipate the labor needs of your business partners before they find themselves with hard-to-fill vacancies. Demonstrating understanding of the local labor market will help reassure that business that you are a true partner in meeting their labor needs.

Some businesses may be well staffed, may hire infrequently, or may have labor needs that expand and contract. Don't let that interfere with developing that partnership. Remember, there are many ways to get to know the business by offering a service or with a minimal "ask."

VR agencies have a lot of value to offer, including:

- » Developing internships and externships
- » Staff training on disability
- » Consultation on accommodations
- » Accessibility and universal design principles

If the business is apprehensive that a worker can meet performance standards or fit in to the culture, developing an on-the-job training placement can allow the client to demonstrate their ability with less risk than a direct hire. In addition, negotiating opportunities for your clients like job shadowing and informational interviews can help keep you connected to businesses—and that can pay off later, when they're hiring.

**The more innovative you can be, the better the partnership. Businesses don't know what they don't know. Any free training ... the technology piece, possibly on [disability] etiquette ... Businesses love that and need that.**

*—Kathy Burris, Work Initiative Manager, CVSHealth*

## Making the hiring process painless

What customer doesn't want fast and efficient service? When the opportunity arises for you to make a referral for an interview and a potential hire, make sure everyone is prepared to move forward.

- » Prepare the candidate (and yourself) for the interview.
- » Make sure the candidate is ready with everything he or she needs for the hiring process. Bring along (or have electronic access to) identification, references, portfolio, resume, documentation of eligibility for work and work/hire, etc.
- » If you are using tax credits as incentives, be willing to help the hiring manager or supervisor with the paperwork.
- » If accommodations may be necessary, bring those ideas with you for early discussion.

When a business has an unfilled labor need, it creates a problem. Creating an efficient and effective job match makes your agency a problem-solver.

## Striving toward customer satisfaction

People with a background in rehabilitation are familiar with the concept of ongoing supports. This means providing the services necessary to help a person maintain employment over time. Let's look at this idea in terms of customer satisfaction.

Do your very best to arrange referrals that match the needs of the client and the business that employs them. At the end of the day, we need to focus on what works best for both parties. If the job seeker isn't happy at the job, they won't stay. If the employer isn't happy with their performance, they won't keep the employee. If the hire doesn't stay for whatever reason, then the business still has a problem, and the client doesn't have a job.

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Of course, despite your best efforts to make a good match, not every hire will work out. Every customer relationship is bound to have occasional pitfalls. If there is a problem and you make every effort to solve it, whether it's working with the client to improve their performance or helping to find a replacement, you will be demonstrating your commitment. That can go a long way toward maintaining trust with the business.

If your client referral is happy and the work is getting done, keep checking in. Most businesses will respect the follow-up, and it will put you in a position to see if there are additional opportunities for other clients. Continue to explore some of the services the business might find helpful (disability training, on-the-job training, etc.).

**The responsiveness to our environment has been part of what makes the relationship [to VR] work best for us. I think it's that responsiveness is what's going to keep working together in the future.**

*—Alesia Jones  
Chief Human Resources Officer  
University of Alabama at Birmingham*

Public recognition is often appreciated by businesses. A common approach is to invite a number of your business partners for breakfast or lunch to discuss successes they have had with people who have been hired. Recognize your key partners with some kind of plaque or award. This is good public relations for them and acknowledges them as leaders in the business community. It lets other employers learn from their examples.

An event like this is also an opportunity to collect information from your business customers, and then tailor your services accordingly. Is their business expanding? Are they providing a new product or service? Do they anticipate changes in the local business climate in terms of labor needs or regulations?

If employers are confident that you add value to their business, they will likely be more flexible in terms of hiring practices, potential accommodations, job carving, etc.

## Summing up

The ideas recommended here represent the first steps on a long journey. They may take you out of your comfort zone. But remember, if you focus solely on getting a given client hired, you will miss out on the opportunity to develop the kind of relationships that will grow.

You bring an invaluable asset to any business: your capacity to match individuals who are motivated and ready to work with employers' needs for skilled talent. And while initiating business partnerships is vital, sustaining them—through repeat contacts and exchanges—is essential. When you treat employers as customers, learn their language, listen actively, and satisfy their needs for skilled talent, you are building a lasting relationship that matters.

Practicing this mindset in your business engagement efforts will reap rewards for your clients, your agency, your business partners, and your community.

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# Explore VR

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For more information on business engagement, visit [www.ExploreVR.org](http://www.ExploreVR.org).

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