

Impact of Agency Context on Effectiveness of Business Development Training

What Were We Trying to Learn?

Working with businesses is an important part of the job for VR counselors, but many are uncomfortable with this aspect of their work. We provided rehabilitation counselors for the blind at four VR agencies with training on how to improve their business development activities by using the dual customer approach. This approach encourages counselors to consider the needs of both job seekers with disabilities and potential employers and emphasizes building relationships with employers.

We wanted to know whether this training would be effective at improving VR counselors' business development knowledge, skills, and confidence. We also wanted to know if the impacts would last over time and whether agencies would have different outcomes.

How Was This Project Carried Out?

We provided the same business development training to staff at four VR agencies at two different times. The 19-hour training was created specifically for counselors who work with job seekers who are blind or have low vision. It was meant to improve counselors' ability to effectively work with employers by boosting counselors' skills and confidence in this area. We also offered technical assistance via a written report to agency administrators and conducted follow-up interviews with administrators and some staff.

We collected data over 18 months, including both before and after counselors received the training, to track the training's long-term outcomes. We measured counselors' self-efficacy for business development, adherence to the dual-customer approach, business development knowledge, and self-perceived business development knowledge, skills, and comfort.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

- The training was associated with improvements in all the outcomes we measured. This indicates that the training is a successful way to improve counselors' business development knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
- There were significant improvements on all outcome measures immediately following the training, but the level of improvement differed between agencies on three of the six outcomes. Over time, counselor gains in the self-perceived measures were retained, but in some agencies, counselors tended to have decreases in the other outcomes. The amount of these decreases was different between agencies.
- Staff at one agency (Agency 1) had significant increases on all outcomes that lasted for the length of the study. This agency had no counselor attrition during the study; its counselors reported the highest level of agency support for business development activities; and only one counselor reported any barriers to business development in the agency's policies or procedures.

Research Takeaway

The long-term effectiveness of a business development training for counselors varied between four vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies, highlighting the importance of agency context for the success of business development training.

- Agency 1 was the only agency where ongoing, agency-wide change happened after the training. Counselors at this agency started talking about business development activities during their monthly conference calls. This indicates buy-in on the importance of business development at the counselor level.
- Agency 1 was also the only agency where administrators asked for a phone call to talk about the technical assistance report, indicating support for business development among agency leadership.
- Although they weren't the focus of this study, perceived importance of business development activities and actual number of employer contacts were both linked to more positive training outcomes. The more value participants placed on working with businesses, the more they benefitted from the training.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- The finding that Agency 1 had increases in all measures that lasted over time highlights the importance of agency context on the effectiveness of the training. High levels of counselor turnover and perceived agency-level barriers to business development activities seemed to lessen the training's long-term success.
- Administrators should think about how agency policies and practices can encourage or discourage business development. For a business development training to be effective over time, administrators may need to make agency-wide changes to support counselors in these activities.
- Counselors' attitudes towards business development impacted how much they benefitted from the training. Administrators should make it clear that they value business development, such as by regularly talking about business development during meetings, sharing success stories, and making business development part of counselors' performance reviews.

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

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