

Recommendations for VR Professionals Regarding a First Meeting with an Employer

One of the most commonly identified barriers to employment for individuals who are blind or visually impaired (B/VI) is negative employer attitudes, indicating that vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals' contact with employers may be an effective avenue to encourage hiring of this population. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act has mandated employer engagement and the provision of services to employers, making this activity more important than ever. Yet there is little information available about what actually works to encourage employers to hire people who are B/VI. Some approaches thought to work are (1) providing education about blindness/visual impairment, (2) using the dual customer approach, and (3) allowing the employer to meet with or observe people who are B/VI.

For these reasons, the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision conducted a study that evaluated different approaches to a first meeting between a VR professional and an employer. The purpose of the study was to:

1. determine whether a meeting between a VR professional and employer can improve (a) attitudes toward people who are B/VI as employees, (b) knowledge about how B/VI can perform work tasks, and (c) intent to hire people who are B/VI.
2. determine whether an educational or dual customer approach is more effective.
3. determine whether vision status of the VR professional (blind vs. sighted) affects outcomes.

The following recommendations are based on the results of this study. First, we will provide a brief overview of how the study was conducted and its results. For additional details about the study, please see McDonnall and Antonelli (2020).

What We Did

Fifty-nine managers who make hiring decisions for a financial services company had a one-hour meeting with a VR professional. Two VR professionals conducted the meetings, using either an educational or dual customer approach. One VR professional was sighted and one was totally blind. The VR professionals used scripts for each approach. The hiring managers were randomly assigned to meet with one of the two VR professionals and to receive either the educational or dual customer approach. The hiring managers completed surveys that measured the study outcomes (attitudes, knowledge, and intent to hire) before the meeting, soon after the meeting, and four months later. At the end of the meeting, hiring managers were invited to have follow-up contact with a local VR professional.

What We Found

Improvements in all outcomes were observed after the meetings. There were no differences in improvements based on VR professionals' vision status. There was only one difference based on use of an educational versus the dual customer approach: knowledge increased more with use of the educational approach and this improvement was retained at follow-up, while the knowledge increase with the dual customer approach was not maintained. Improvements were

retained at follow-up for attitudes and knowledge (with the exception noted above), but increases in intent to hire were not maintained. There were no differences between the groups on interest in follow-up with a local VR professional, and almost half of the hiring managers requested follow-up. Despite an expressed interest in follow-up, only a few hiring managers (6 of 29, or 20.7%) reported having contact with a local VR professional four months after the meeting.

Recommendations for VR Professionals

- ◆ **Get out and meet with employers as much as possible because it works!** Our study found that attitudes, knowledge, and intent to hire can be improved based on a one-hour meeting with a VR professional. Intent to hire and better attitudes and knowledge are associated with hiring people who are B/VI, so a short meeting may help pave the way for a consumer to be considered for employment.
- ◆ **For these meetings, use the approach that is more natural for you, or a hybrid approach.** Strictly using one approach or the other is not required. For our study we made them unique, but in practice a combination of approaches is possible. You may need to approach each employer differently, based on how the conversation goes and the questions they ask. The personality of the employer plays into the best approach, as does your personality. You should be able to "read" employers and appropriately respond and follow their leads. Flexibility is important when meeting with employers, and ideally, in practice, you will have the skills to utilize either approach as needed. Remember that understanding employer needs is important, and the dual customer approach provides a good foundation to do this.
- ◆ **Follow-up with employers is needed.** Although attitude and knowledge improvement was generally retained, intent to hire returned to its original level four months after the meeting. This indicates that one meeting with an employer may not be enough to encourage them to hire an applicant who is B/VI in the future. You should always try to plan your next follow-up with the employer during the first meeting.
- ◆ **Follow-up about the services that were planned or the information that was requested by the business within the time frame you indicated in the meeting.** If you indicated that you would provide the service or the information within one week, be sure to meet that deadline. If a follow-up was not planned at the first meeting, contact the employer soon after to maintain that connection. It is important to strike while the iron is hot! Employers are more likely to be enthusiastic about what you discussed if you can continue the conversation soon. Any enthusiasm that was generated in the first meeting could quickly fade.
- ◆ **Focus your efforts on developing ongoing relationships with employers.** Plan to go beyond simply following-up with employers to developing a relationship with them. Your first meeting and its follow-ups are the start of the relationship. You can create a good foundation for a relationship by being aware of employers' needs and identifying ways you can help address those needs. Focus on the services you can provide to the employer to build that relationship. Once a relationship is established, a natural result of that will be providing qualified applicants for available positions.

More Information

For more information about the study, see the following journal article*:

McDonnall, M. C., & Antonelli, K. (2020). The impact of a brief meeting on employer's attitudes, knowledge, and intent to hire. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355219889409>

For more information about working effectively with employers utilizing the dual customer approach, see the NRTC's online course [*Improving Business Development Skills: A Training for Rehabilitation Professionals*](#).

*This article and other NRTC publications are available for download on our website: www.blind.msstate.edu/research/publications