

Development of the Progressive Employment dual customer model for vocational rehabilitation

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Current trends in vocational rehabilitation value demand-side “dual customer” approaches that serve both businesses and job seekers with disabilities, as well as approaches that use rapid engagement in work-based experiences.

OBJECTIVE: This conceptual paper describes the evolution of Progressive Employment (PE) in Vermont and aims to define the key features and critical components of PE as a distinct model of dual customer service delivery.

CONCLUSION: The PE approach has promise as an effective dual customer model with high potential for replicability in employment systems, especially for job seekers with little or no successful work experience. Salient elements of the model and replication considerations are discussed.

Keywords: Progressive Employment, vocational rehabilitation, transition programs, transition youth, supported employment, dual customer, high risk job seeker, demand side rehabilitation, work experience

1. Introduction and background

Recent trends in vocational rehabilitation (VR) have included two approaches that appear to have great promise for advancing the field. One is a greater emphasis in VR on business engagement and responsiveness to employer needs, and the other is an emphasis on rapid work engagement for job seekers. In regard to a greater emphasis on employer interaction, in 1997 the Institute on Rehabilitation Issues released its 23rd study group report on “Developing Effective Partnerships With Employers as a

Service Delivery Mechanism” (Fry, 1997). The authors call for a concerted effort to close the gap between business and VR, and identify both people with disabilities and employers as VR customers. Nearly 20 years later, the emphasis on the “business relations model” or “dual customer approach” continues to grow as a priority for the state-federal VR system (McDonnall, Zhou, & Crudden, 2013; Leucking, 2008). Demand-side approaches in VR can include a focus on the employer as a customer with specific needs and preferences that should shape how VR goes about providing services (Wagner, Armstrong, Fraser, Vandergoot, & Thomas, 2006).

Chan, Strauser, Gervy, and Lee (2010) identify one purpose of demand-side approaches as a process of discovering areas of growth in employment

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opportunities and preparing workers for these in-demand occupations. The rationale is simple: by engaging in demand-driven VR service provision, people with disabilities will more likely attain skill sets that are responsive to current and future business needs. Much of the rehabilitation counseling demand-side literature has investigated employer perceptions on hiring, training, and accommodating workers with disabilities (Burke, Bezyak, Fraser, Pete, Ditchman, & Chan, 2013; Chan, Strauser, Maher, Lee, Jones, & Johnson, 2010; Copeland, Chan, Bezyak, & Fraser, 2010; Domzal, Houtenville, & Sharma, 2008; Stensrud, 2007), the intentions of employers to engage candidates with disabilities as part of recruitment (Fraser, Ajzen, Johnson, Hebert, & Chan, 2011), the benefits of providing accommodations for employers (Solovieva, Dowler, & Walls, 2011), and the employability skills valued by employers (Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2011). In addition to understanding employer perceptions, some demand-side research focuses on employer behavior regarding ADA compliance (Bruyere, Erickson, & VanLooy, 2006) or employer discrimination against a subpopulation, such as the aging workforce (Bjelland, Bruyere, von Schrader, Houtenville, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Webber, 2010).

Burke, Bezyak, Fraser, Pete, Ditchman, and Chan (2013) conducted a review of literature on employer attitudes toward hiring and retaining people with disabilities, and concluded that adoption of demand-side strategies by rehabilitation professionals would likely have a positive impact on the work participation rates of people with disabilities. But what are those strategies? The need to identify emerging strategies and conduct research that leads to evidence-based practices in business relations for state VR agencies is apparent. There is limited empirical evidence to support the development of sustainable business and rehabilitation partnerships (Unger, 2007) or job development strategies in relation to employers' preferences (Simonsen et al., 2011).

The lack of well-defined dual customer models, approaches, and rigorous research conducted within state VR agencies has limited the opportunity for promising practices to evolve into evidence-based practices. Despite this, VR agencies are taking steps to meet the demands of businesses, as seen in their service delivery and staffing patterns. According to a survey of VR agencies conducted in 2011, the Institute for Community Inclusion reported that 70% (45 out of 64 reporting agencies) of VR agencies employ business employment representatives (Porter, Kwan,

Marrone, & Foley, 2012). A subsequent survey of VR agencies conducted in 2014 found that 46 of 66 reporting agencies (nearly 70%) of VR agencies have specialized VR staff – defined as staff that spend more than 50% of their time - implementing business relations strategies (Haines et al., 2016).

Another recent trend in the provision of VR services is an emphasis on rapid engagement of job seekers with employment sites. One underlying rationale is that work skills are best learned in a work environment. The most prominent intervention associated with rapid engagement is the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model (Drake, 1998). Recently, IPS was expanded to include a practice principle based on developing relationships with employers, and researchers at the Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center developed guidelines around this topic (Swanson, Becker, & Bond, 2013).

Honeycutt and Stapleton (2013) prepared an analysis for a rapid engagement coordinated team approach intervention ("the SGA Project") under study by the Institute for Community Inclusion to improve employment outcomes of VR job seekers receiving SSDI benefits. Findings indicate that longer waiting times (or delays) in receiving VR services reduce earnings outcomes for SSDI beneficiaries, reduce program income opportunities for VR agencies, and may increase costs for the Social Security Administration (Honeycutt & Stapleton, 2013). Preliminary findings from the SGA randomized controlled intervention in Kentucky and Minnesota indicate that a rapid engagement ("faster pacing") coordinated team approach may increase employment outcomes within 180 days in both states (Kehn, Babalola, Honeycutt, Livermore, Doubleday, Stapleton, & Sevak 2016; Martin, Morris, Honeycutt, Livermore, Doubleday, Sevak, & Stapleton 2017). Montana Rural Institute's efforts to understand why job seekers disengage from VR services indicates that a significant proportion of "premature exiters" were dissatisfied with the speed of services and the lack of information provided by counselors about the local labor market (Ipsen & Goe, 2016). Ipsen & Goe estimate national financial implications of premature exit from VR at \$365 million dollars per year.

Over the past decade, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) in Vermont has recognized the importance of a dual customer approach, as well as the importance of early work engagement as an employment strategy. Through systematic program refinement and feedback/evaluation, Vermont DVR documented a substantial improvement in

rehabilitation rates using an approach known as Progressive Employment (PE). The remainder of this paper details 1) the context for the development and use of PE strategies in Vermont; 2) a description of components that are considered essential to PE as a distinct dual-customer model; and, 3) discussion of the potential for model replication in employment systems outside of Vermont, and the identification of future research needs.

1.1. Evolution of progressive employment

Vermont DVR is a designated state VR general agency, housed in the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living, and serves in a small state recognized as having the highest percentage of its population living in rural areas. The DVR has approximately 1800–1900 successful closures per year and has sixty-five counselors providing services in 12 field offices organized into six regions. Vermont DVR delivers most services directly, although it has a unique relationship with a vendor, the Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation (VABIR), that co-locates in all 12 VR offices providing placement services through employment specialists. In early 2009, Vermont DVR leadership committed to a rapid placement approach, but identified some implementation issues, especially in rural settings. VABIR personnel (the CRP most directly involved with VR job placements) and DVR staff identified that employers consistently raised concerns about risks of hiring people with disabilities including costs of turnover, lack of soft skills, and “bad reputations” of some individuals in rural areas.

Vermont DVR also had an interest in expanding its reach in the business community beyond its current employers. DVR leadership then reviewed the behavior of high performing staff and identified a set of practices to create a dual customer strategy that advanced the employment needs of people with significant barriers to employment. DVR took advantage of the opportunity to use American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds to implement the strategy that prioritized job seekers that employers perceived as high risk and to adopt private sector recruiting strategies familiar to employers. The process, originally called “alternative placements,” evolved into “Progressive Employment” within the first year. DVR incorporated the notion of a “risk-free trial” from the sales and recruiting worlds so that employers have a chance to screen potential hires before bringing them on payroll. Initial contacts with

employers using this approach indicated that employers were more than willing to help VR job seekers gain more experience, improve their resumes, while at the same time giving employers a risk-free chance to screen potential future employees. In a 2009 survey of 100 businesses who had participated in at least one PE activity, approximately 88% reported they were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the model as a way to recruit candidates with disabilities. Survey results also indicated these businesses had a better understanding of ways to recruit candidates with disabilities, as well as a better understanding of how to provide accommodations as a result of using the Progressive Employment model (Robertson & Madden, 2010).

The PE core team is the VR job seeker, Employer, Business Account Manager (BAM) Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC), and the Employment Specialist (ES). The expected roles of the core team are expounded in a subsequent section.

1.2. Focus on high risk or difficult to place job seekers

This model was created for job seekers who are hard to place due to a lack of prior work experience, poor soft skills, or stigmatizing histories (e.g., incarceration, mental illness, severe disabilities). Specific work experiences are negotiated with the understanding that the worksite engagement is of limited duration, with no expectation that the job seekers must take a job at the end of the experience, or that the employer is obligated to offer a job to the candidate.

job seekers have a menu of work exposure options. With “higher dose” exposures such as “work experience” (in contrast to low dose exposures such as a company tour), they can work up to 25 hours per week from one to six weeks. The individual builds his or her resume, while the employer evaluates the job seeker for present or future positions in the work place. This process can assist job seekers in reducing fear about employment and job performance, while reducing employer hesitancy about hiring persons with disabilities. In addition, the PE setting provides an excellent opportunity for vocational assessment of a job seeker who is identified as being at greater risk for employment failure.

PE could fit a job seeker interested in career exploration, enabling him or her to take a company tour or shadow an employee at a business. Someone who has little or no work history might use a series of short work experiences to develop soft skills and receive an

introduction to technical skills. Perhaps a job seeker has some experience and is interested in a particular job, but there are no openings currently. A work experience with an employer could add to the person's resume and increase his/her skill level. It is also a risk-free way to introduce the job seeker to the employer, who is under no obligation to hire the individual. Another benefit is that the job seekers also gain current, local business references. This can be especially important in a smaller community.

For job seekers, particularly those in rural areas and who have multiple barriers to work, a work experience can build a positive reputation for that person. In rural settings an individual can get a reputation as a bad prospect for hiring, but a PE exposure or work experience can assist in ameliorating that problem. In spite of there being no obligation for employers to hire VR job seekers who are gaining work experience, DVR has found that approximately 48% of PE job seekers successfully closed are hired by an employer where they carried out a work experience (Porter, 2016). In DVR, as well as in replication states, enrollment in PE results in fewer early dropouts from VR. This is an increasingly important distinction because new WIOA regulations have changed the metrics for measuring VR success to include more scrutiny of the percentage of applicants who drop out before plan (IPE).

Two key philosophical shifts accompanied the development of PE. First, DVR eliminated the concept of "job-ready" and switched to "everybody is ready for something." Instead of heavy use of assessments or job readiness categorization, DVR wanted to promote rapid access to real work settings and use the experiences as a form of assessment. The idea was to encourage momentum. The second shift was a focus on job seekers generally thought to be too risky to promote to employers. Some of the employment risks are disability related, but some include multiple barriers such as limited educational credentials, no or poor work history, poor soft skills, involvement with corrections or substance abuse histories, and jobseeker anxiety about working. Even with the advantages that PE offers, it is not for everyone. VR job seekers who already have skills and experience or those who desire immediate employment are not good candidates.

In order to address their increased focus on employer needs, DVR increased the number of staff specifically assigned to business relations. This role was titled "Business Account Manager" (BAM), and this person was not expected to carry a client caseload. This is similar to many VR programs at

this time, except that a proportionally larger number of BAMs exist in Vermont DVR than in their counterparts in other VR agencies. DVR currently employs nine full time BAMs.

In VT, a BAM may be an employee of VR or of the primary CRP, Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation (VABIR). In the case of VABIR BAM's, their positions are funded full time by DVR in order to give those staff greater latitude in how they approach employers. They are expected to spend at least 75% of their time in the field meeting with employers. DVR especially encourages BAM applications from people who have worked in occupations such as sales or staffing agencies, rather than vocational rehabilitation. The philosophy is that business/employer engagement skills are not as readily learned as rehabilitation considerations in the workplace. DVR has discovered that teaching a true salesperson about disability and social services is easier than trying to teach a human services worker how to sell.

In contrast to the BAM, the Employment Specialist (ES) is primarily responsible for matching the interests, skills, and work tolerance of specific job seekers with the vocational interests and nature of the experience that employers are willing to offer. DVR has a high ratio of ES to VRC's in each district office with most ES staff employed by VABIR. The ES is responsible for arranging for work experience placements. Since they can access DVR funds to accomplish this goal, they do not need prior approval of the VRC to effect these placements once a job seeker has been initially designated as appropriate for PE by the VRC. DVR has found that requiring counselor approval of specific job placements slowed down the rapid engagement process, and was unnecessary for effective case management. In addition, within PE even an unsuccessful work experience is a valuable learning step that ultimately assists job seekers in finding employment. And since the ES is a team member with the employer, unsuccessful placements can be resolved rapidly with less responsibility falling on the employer.

Although some group experiences are permissible (e.g., company tours), the primary goal is to individually match the job seeker and the employment site. Since the job seeker may have limited or no successful experience with work, the ES is in most cases expected to be at the work site with the job seeker, at least during the first few contacts. Furthermore, the ES is expected to follow up with the employer immediately after the first contact, at least within

24 hours. Thanks to information in the employer database, the employer is contacted via their preferred method (phone call, text, email, site visit). The ES is further expected to be available at any time to address employer concerns that may arise from this placement. The PE approach (see Table 1) provides the ES with a range of high and low dose work exposure options to match the immediate needs of job seekers and employers.

The VRC roles in PE include referral of a specific job seeker to Jobsville, which is the primary mechanism for enrolling the job seeker in PE. They are also responsible for a hand-off to the ES, who is then responsible for linking that person with an employer and an appropriate work exposure option. A five-minute presentation of a new referral is provided by the VRC in the Jobsville meeting, followed by a discussion of potential work exposures that might be a good match for this person. All attendees in the meeting are encouraged to contribute, and it's not unusual for someone other than the BAM to know of a specific work environment that might be a good fit. Following the discussion, a specific ES is assigned to the case, and the VRC provides a folder to the ES on that job seeker that contains basic case information. A client release of information specific to Jobsville is signed by the job seeker prior to the presentation in Jobsville, and this is often obtained during the eligibility or IPE phases of the case. VRC's are intentionally not given specific guidelines on who should be referred for PE in order to give them greater latitude in their approaches to job seekers. Approximately 12% of all DVR clients are recorded as receiving one or more PE service.

1.3. The employer and dual customer design

PE is predicated on a dual customer approach to job placement, where the immediate and long-term needs of local employers are integrated into the VR planning process. Employers are offered a variety of options to participate. There does not have to be a specific open position with a business that the job seeker is slotted for in order to initiate a PE work experience. In some cases, employers take this opportunity to create positions on a trial basis to see if they make sense to the business. Employers are offered options of engaging with job seekers in company tours, job shadows, short-term work experience, and on-the-job training options. DVR believes this approach with employers will reduce the cost of recruiting and hiring, reduce perceived risk, and ultimately create better matches between jobseeker and employer.

DVR has found that accommodations that can be conceptually daunting to businesses are often worked out during the "no-risk" period. Consequently, if the business is ready to hire a job seeker, many of the details of accommodations, shift preferences, transportation, and childcare, etc., have already been worked out. The business benefits because they are assisting in hiring persons with disabilities (tax and humanitarian benefits), they can try out potential employees with no obligation to hire, and/or they can prototype new job descriptions or positions without expending capital. For small businesses, DVR is playing the role of an outsourced HR unit by seeking talent that matches identified needs, providing advice to an owner or supervisor about accommodations, and partnering on solutions. Particularly for entry-level jobs,

Table 1
PE service options for job seekers and employers

Work experiences with training offset	The employer allows the individual to try out a job on site for time-limited period (1–8 weeks) DVR pays the individual a training offset to cover expenses related to participation DVR provides workers' compensation and general liability insurance
Company tours and job shadows	Generally very short term (one to three days) For a company tour the job seeker only visits the work site For a job shadow the job seeker observes a specific job (or selection of jobs) over one to three days DVR may provide the employer a small payment for their time and a stipend for the job seeker to cover expenses DVR provides workers' compensation and general liability insurance
On-the-Job Training	The employer hires the individual directly DVR pays a portion of the employer's costs for additional training for a time-limited period (up to three months) after hire Because trainee is an employee, employer is responsible for workers' compensation and general liability insurance
Temp-to-hire	The individual is employed by a temporary agency and placed with a local employer The employer pays the temp agency DVR pays a portion of the temp agency's costs The temp agency provides workers' compensation & general liability insurance

employers stated that they had a “high failure” rate hiring off the street, and therefore they value PE for filling entry-level jobs (Robertson & Madden, 2010). However, DVR is not in the business of providing temporary workers to businesses, and steps are taken by the BAM and ES so that employers do not receive a continual source of free labor.

Although the overall success rate of PE is high in VT, progressive employment is not a promise of permanent work via any specific job exposure. The job seeker and business both appreciate this, and this aspect of PE minimizes unrealistic expectations or concerns on both sides.

1.3.1. The weekly PE team meeting

One of the key components in PE is weekly meetings, known as “Jobsville” where all VR and CRP staff attend. In VT, these meetings are centered around specific offices and geographic areas. In some cases where rural distances make it difficult to attend a meeting, teleconference connections are utilized by some staff. In a technological era where direct interpersonal communication is becoming less common in social service agencies, this meeting stands out as distinctly different. The Jobsville communication is most often identified by participating staff as to why PE works so well. In VT, staff most often identify Jobsville as one of the highlights of their work week. The agenda is highly focused, time limited, and has a designated leader (often a BAM). The set agenda includes 1. Successes, 2. New referrals, 3. Updates on PE job seekers, 4. Emerging local labor market information, and 5. Challenging cases. This provides a forum for sharing information about business needs, while identifying VR job seekers who have an interest in those business areas. Jobsville is considered an essential component of PE, as it promotes better and considerably more timely communication among the team, resulting in rapid engagement of job seekers, as well as quicker responses to identified business needs. DVR has found that if the Jobsville meeting is functioning properly, staff are highly motivated to attend so requiring their attendance is not an issue. Staffing of job seekers in Jobsville can include persons in PE as well as other VR participants.

1.4. Mechanism for set-aside training offset funds and liability insurance

In order to avoid potential problems with benefits spenddown requirements or conflicts with provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), job

seekers in a work experience are not considered as paid for working but rather compensated for attending this training experience. This approach makes additional sense when considering that work experiences are short term (average six weeks or less) and less than 40 hours per week. Funds for PE training offsets are held in a “set-aside” funding pool that is separate from VR counselor case management funds, so that PE expenditures do not “compete” with other VR needs. This DVR variation in compensation is very much on a state-to-state basis, as the majority of replication states have chosen instead to pay a temporary hourly wage to job seekers in work experience placements (in part, a function of state policy and interpretation of FLSA standards.) The PE process can begin as soon as the IPE is signed, with work experiences up to 25 hours per week, typically lasting for between six and eight weeks. The job experiences are not intended to provide a living wage, unless the employer places a person on their payroll through an On-the-Job Training option. However, training offsets may be provided to job seekers to cover out-of-pocket costs.

The 2016 DVR agency-wide annual PE set-aside budget was \$175,000, and these funds were independent from individual counselor budgets for case services. The separate funds help eliminate counselor conflicts on how to spend limited case service dollars early in a VR case. In VT, DVR office managers receive monthly reports detailing the amounts of set-aside funds used by their counseling staff, so they can gauge use of these funds compared to other budgets or offices in the state. PE is defined by the agency as a short-term intervention, and unless unusual circumstances dictate, each work experience is limited to six weeks.

Liability insurance and work compensation for PE placements, as well as travel and training stipends for job seekers, are underwritten by DVR, making it much easier for employers to participate. This was accomplished for DVR by adding a rider to an existing insurance policy within their larger Department of Labor. Replication states have initiated their own solutions for the provision of compensation and insurance for job seekers in PE based on existing programs and policies.

1.5. Refining the PE model

The PE approach has evolved into a defined model through eight years of refinement by DVR, as well as input from national experts and state systems.

Refinement activities include the following:

1. Committing the process to paper – written documentation of the approach has been integral to its development since the inception. DVR has produced a manual to show forms and processes of the model.
2. Statewide involvement of community partner organizations (e.g., TANF, criminal justice, school programs) required elaboration and standardization of model. Since the model espouses a dual customer approach that includes employers and community partners, the communication process has been formalized across agencies for clarity.
3. Extensive data collection of employer information, interactions, and services as well as jobseeker-specific data has been integral to improving processes.
4. A continuing partnership with the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI, UMass, Boston) has further refined the model by assisting with contextualizing the model within current research in VR as well as creating a mechanism for replication in other state policies.
5. Expert review has included focus groups and work sessions with multiple current and former state VR Directors and Employment Consultants. These processes have identified components of the model that appear essential and unique.
6. Replication in four states has been possible via ICI's RRTC on Demand Side Strategies, where the model is being tested. Data collection and research/evaluation activities are further testing the PE model including essential components, policies, and practices that facilitate its use.
7. Development of draft fidelity measures was completed via a learning collaborative composed of the four replication states, VT DVR, ICI, and national experts.

There are 6 core components identified as integral to the PE Model (see Table 2):

1.6. Utilization and outcome data

Since the initial funding of PE with ARRA funds, extensive records have been maintained by DVR regarding PE utilization and outcomes. The first five years of outcome data convinced DVR to continue this program when the funding cycle was complete. Since the cessation of ARRA funding they have

maintained an annual budget for this activity separate from office budgets. Data from May 2009 to July 2016 identified a total of 2395 VR job seekers who participated in PE, corresponding to 12% of all agency clients during that time (Porter, 2016). Approximately 29% of PE job seekers had two or more high dose PE experiences of approximately six weeks duration before case closure. A high dose is any experience lasting more than one day, typically six weeks in duration. Approximately 44.4% of all PE job seekers were transition aged youth. The most frequent primary disabilities represented in PE were mental illness (39.2%), cognitive disability (35.9%) and physical/sensory disability (18.3%). The rehabilitation rate (successful job placement post IPE) for PE was nearly two-thirds (62%) verses an agency-wide rehabilitation rate of 57 percent for this entire time period. During the same eight year period DVR staff (primarily BAMs) recorded relationships with more than 12,862 business contacts (HR managers, business owners, supervisors etc.) identified in 6,799 distinct businesses in Vermont and adjoining counties in NH, MA and NY. It is noted that business contact data also include those contacts for job seekers not in PE; however, it never the less demonstrates the degree to which new employers are contacted and utilized for job exposure or placement options.

1.7. Consumer choice

Because Progressive Employment is flexible and allows for career exploration and discovery for participants, DVR believes it represents a true consumer-choice model. When an individual expresses an interest in a particular employer or industry, the employment staff can use PE as a way to introduce that candidate to a relevant employer/business. In some cases, the individual may discover that what they thought was a good fit is actually not something they are interested in. This "learning" then becomes the starting point for the next PE experience. This characteristic can be challenging for some other VR programs where the IPE is considered to be the final plan that is rarely modified.

1.8. Self-esteem and confidence

Another benefit of Progressive Employment is the increasing confidence and experience it provides DVR job seekers. Many individuals have fears about

Table 2
Vermont Progressive Employment (PE) Model Components

Component	Fidelity elements
Dual customer design	1. Employment staff negotiate directly with employers
	2. Regular contact between employment staff and employers participating in PE
	3. Business account manager role focuses on employer outreach, not VR caseload
Team approach with emphasis on rapid engagement	4. Jobsville or equivalent regular team meetings focused on communication and coordination between employment staff and VR counselors
	5. Entire team credit for successful rehab closure
	6. Job seekers meet with employment specialists close to time of IPE signing
Focus on high-risk or difficult-to-place job seekers	7. Option for job seekers with high risk for employment failure due to lack of work history, criminal history, mental illness, multiple disabilities, or co-existing risk factors
Mechanism for set-asides or training offset funds	8. Funds for PE training offset separate from VR counselor case management funds, so that funds do not compete with other VR needs
Liability and workers' compensation insurance for trainees	9. Mechanism for providing liability and worker comp for trainees in lieu of employer need to provide the same, or equivalent method of liability coverage
Data tracking tools for PE	10. Job seeker RSA-911 case services linked at client level with PE data forms
	11. Continuously updated local employer database regularly used by PE team

returning to, or engaging in, employment after long absences from the workforce, and they often have low self-esteem related to performance and “fitting in”. Progressive Employment allows for incremental steps to help a person build confidence and skills over time. For individuals who are particularly fearful, the starting point may be brief tour of a business or shadowing for a few hours. This ability to incrementally engage individuals and businesses is the hallmark of Progressive Employment. “Progressive” in this case does not mean to imply that job seekers go from low dose to high dose work experiences. Sometimes the opposite is true based on job seeker experiences and the work experience options allowed by employers.

1.9. Replication states

Several other programs have replicated PE since its inception at DVR. This includes four state VR programs, as well as entities within VT that work with TANF or criminal justice populations. The four state-wide VR programs are NE general, ME general, OR blind, and FL blind. In NE VR, the initiative has enrolled nearly 700 job seekers, and their emphasis is engaging VR consumers as soon as possible after they have applied to the agency. ME Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) has targeted transition youth in an effort to reduce “early dropout” from VR, and they recently expanded their program to include more BAMs. The OR Commission for the Blind (OCB) initially focused on stuck cases (in plan for two years or more), as did FL blind. OCB claims that PE has substantially changed how their agency approaches job placement, and they also credit PE activities for improving intra- and inter-agency communication.

These programs have found PE to be sufficiently successful that they are continuing the programs and data collection after the sponsoring ICI funding has ended. Additional VR programs have either expressed interest in PE or they have begun their own initiatives. This includes KS VR, where they have recently begun PE services. KS is primarily targeting persons with intellectual disabilities or persons with disabilities who have recently been released from state prisons. Subsequent papers intend to address the cross site data, as well as programmatic, policy, and administrative infrastructures that appear to support PE.

2. Discussion

PE has received a great deal of attention from other state based VR programs, and it is currently being implemented in a total of six VR agencies, including VT DVR. A common comment from persons new to PE is that this approach is already being utilized by them, and it is “business as usual” for many agencies. While it is likely that many VR agencies offer related services such as paid work experiences and on-the-job training, the PE model extends beyond those service delivery strategies. The combination of dual-customer approaches, high-risk job seekers, and a strong and highly structured team communication approach has not existed in this combination in any of the states that have thus far replicated the PE model. However, the fact that VR agencies often provide similar employment services suggests that this model is transferrable.

Extracting a practice that has been developed by a state VR agency within the confines of policies,

funding obligations, and standard operating procedures is a challenge as clientele, policies, practices, and funding structures vary a great deal across VR agencies. DVR leadership defined the practice more narrowly than ICI researchers during the extraction process. However, key elements such as the Jobsville communication strategy, the localized BAM positions, the ability of Employment Specialists to “close the deal” with employers were not only key elements but did not exist in other locations.

To further assist with transferability, Vermont DVR and partnering researchers have undertaken an extensive documentation of PE to detail the intent, functioning, and expected outcomes of the program. Forms pertaining to job seeker and employer agreements, business contact information, reviews of the work experience (including jobseeker self-evaluations), and employer-focused resources (e.g., tax incentives) are available via online manuals and training materials.

Adoption of PE as a model requires embracing some key philosophical perspectives that affect VR agency leadership and implementation. First and foremost is the elimination of “job readiness” as a metric for placement in work experiences. This is a relatively novel concept within many VR systems. Many state VR agencies see early services for job seekers as including job readiness assessment and evaluation away from any employment settings in order to determine when someone has achieved some level of ability to be referred for job placement. DVR PE counters that “everyone is ready for something” starting the day the VR plan is signed.

Other implementation issues emerge as this philosophical approach is adopted. Should a VR counselor prepare an IPE early and then modify it as the jobseeker learns more about work opportunities? Or, should a VR counselor hold off on the IPE process until a goal and set of services form a contract of sorts. In some VR agencies, counselors may manage heavy caseloads by triaging new applicants to assessments and evaluations. Eliminating the ability to manage case flow in such a way puts more pressure on counselors to concentrate efforts on new customers. This is perceived as a challenging issue in states with heavy caseloads or for counselors who have a higher percentage of their customers who need significant support.

Recent legislation such as the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act of 2014 and civil rights lawsuits such as the Olmstead cases have put more pressure on VR agencies to serve young people, people

with limited work histories, people with significant disabilities, and people who are working in facility-based work settings. VR agencies that seek to develop dual customer strategies must do so in full knowledge that their base of job seekers are persons with more significant employment service needs.

Other practices exist, such as Customized Employment, Project Search, pre-employment training services, registered apprenticeships and supported employment. PE is not in conflict with these services. What PE offers is a dual customer strategy that starts with the business perspective and expects specific behaviors from the team of VRC’s, Employment Specialists, and Business Account Managers. As VR agencies respond to WIOA regulations, they are building business relations units, hiring personnel to carry “caseloads” of businesses, and repurposing their data systems to measure business engagement outcomes. They are also designing pre-employment training services, aligning career pathways services with workforce systems, and developing more work-based learning opportunities.

VT DVR’s innovation offers a solution of how to align business-focused services with jobseeker services all the while maintaining a clear focus on persons with the most significant disabilities. In that way, VT DVR is maximizing the very strengths of the VR program: availability of guidance and counseling, rapid deployment of individualized services, and coordinated social, clinical, and vocational services. Foley, Marrone and Simon (2002) observed that large employment systems such as welfare and workforce functioned as cruise ships by moving large numbers of persons through a menu of services while VR systems functioned more like kayaks moving high need customers along winding rivers. In order to do that effectively, VR agencies need practices that can be implemented in situ and are based on the need for individualization. PE is one such practice.

2.1. Outstanding features of the PE model

PE has several features that may lead to further replications:

- **Applicability to a range of businesses:** A strong focus on employer needs, with business account managers who are responsible for contacting and recruiting employers for PE. In DVR, Business Account Managers tend to function similar to staffing agency personnel.

- Applicable to a wide range of populations: Vermont developed the model to serve individuals with multiple barriers to employment; the approach is not specific for any population and holds promise for a very wide range of job seekers both within VR and potentially across other human service systems.
- The PE model is “manualized” (e.g., many programmatic and training components compiled into a single manual), including all forms and data sheets necessary for the management of the program. All VR and associated CRP staff in the state have been thoroughly trained on the model and have a consistent vision for how and why to use PE, and PE is formally incorporated into DVR policy.
- The team communication expectations in PE distinctly set it apart from how most VR services are provided. The team meets very often and shares real time information about employers and job seekers. The team building aspects of the model are reported to be very professionally rewarding for staff.
- The risk is taken on by a third party, not business: Liability insurance and worker comp are provided by DVR; therefore, employers have less reluctance to allow non-employees into their job sites.

Since multiple state-wide replications of PE have occurred in the last several years, aspects of the model are being elaborated in order to be sensitive to the wide differences in services delivery and population characteristics that exist in state VR agencies across the country. This has been assisted by an ICI-supported Learning Collaborative among the agencies that use PE. The permutations of PE being tested and discussed in this Collaborative include varied service delivery models (e.g., CRP vs. central case management), roles and timing of vocational evaluation, the definition of “early engagement” for work experiences, mechanisms for compensation or other support for work experiences, and how to provide liability insurance or worker compensation for work experiences.

2.2. *Future research*

The success of the PE program and the apparent ease with which it can fit into current VR practices has generated much interest from other state VR and human services agencies. In some respects, the

interest in replicating this program has outstripped the available research on efficacy and effectiveness. To address this issue, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in partnership with VT DVR, is completing a five-year research project to evaluate and attempt replication of this model in other state VR agencies. This project is engaged in documenting critical process and outcome data on replication of PE, as well as more in-depth analysis of outcome data from VT DVR itself. Some of the issues that are being addressed include whether other states experience improved outcomes with PE, the specific disability and age groups that benefit from PE, service delivery models lending themselves to PE, the role of early engagement in outcomes, and what PE services can be utilized with transition youth and pre-employment transition services.

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