

32ND INSTITUTE ON REHABILITATION ISSUES:

THE VR-BUSINESS NETWORK: CHARTING YOUR COURSE

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Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) Continuing Education Credit

Readers are encouraged to use the 32nd Institute on Rehabilitation Issues monograph *The VR-Business Network: Charting Your Course* as a self-study course in order to obtain continuing education credit for Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC). Persons interested in earning CRC credit should study the questions at the end of each chapter. Then go to the University of Arkansas CURRENTS Web site, www.rcep6.org, to register and take the online examination. There is a \$25 registration fee to take the exam.

Additional online exams for CRC using previously published IRIs are available at the University of Arkansas CURRENTS Web site and at the George Washington University Web site, <http://www.gwu.edu/~rrcep/>.

Contents

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS	7
FOREWORD: A CALL TO ACTION: THE TIME IS NOW FOR VR-BUSINESS NETWORKS	9
<i>The Challenge: VR Customer Expectations</i>	10
<i>The Opportunity: The VR System Responds</i>	10
<i>The Call to Action</i>	11
<i>The Bottom Line: The Ship is Sailing Are You on Board?</i>	13
CHAPTER ONE: INVENTING OUR FUTURE: VR-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS	15
<i>Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) as a Dual Customer System</i>	15
<i>VR as “One Company”</i>	16
<i>The VR Niche and the Dual Customer Model</i>	17
<i>Employer Expectations in VR-Business Partnerships</i>	17
<i>Consumer Expectations in VR-Business Partnerships</i>	18
<i>Expectations in the VR-to-VR Connections with the Dual Customer</i>	19
<i>Business as a Customer of the National VR Network</i>	20
<i>Business Customers: What They Are and What They Are Not</i>	20
<i>Progression of the VR System: The National Network with Business</i>	21
<i>What the VR-Business Networks Are and Are Not</i>	22

<i>Our Past is Paving the Way to our Future: Where VR has Been - The Foundation for Future Success</i>	24
<i>The Next Step in the Evolution - Shifting from a State System or Regional Approach to a National Network</i>	25
<i>Common Language – Is the Language VR Uses Defined by Customers?</i>	26
<i>Inventing our Future: Challenges, Consequences and Opportunities.....</i>	28
<i>The Benefits of VR-Business Network Alliances.....</i>	29
<i>Coming Attractions in this IRI.....</i>	30
<i>In Closing... Points to Ponder.....</i>	30
<i>Self-Study Questions</i>	32

CHAPTER TWO: LISTENING TO OUR BUSINESS

CUSTOMERS.....	33
<i>Introduction.....</i>	34
<i>What VR-Business Partners Expect from the Network... ..</i>	34
<i>Quoting Our Customers: Suggestions from VR-Business Partners Regarding the Formalization of VR-Business Networks</i>	35
<i>Summing it All Up</i>	38
<i>Sourcing Our Business Partner Input</i>	38
<i>Summary</i>	40
<i>Self-Study Questions</i>	42

CHAPTER THREE: LINKING CONSUMER CHOICE TO THE VR-BUSINESS NETWORK.....

43	
<i>Introduction.....</i>	43
<i>Supporting Consumer Choice</i>	44
<i>ONYOUR MARK – Targeting the Right Business</i>	45
<i>GET SET – Preparing Consumers for the Hiring Process</i>	47
<i>GO – Guiding Consumers toward Success</i>	48
<i>Summary</i>	49
<i>Self-Study Questions</i>	50

CHAPTER FOUR: FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING THE VR-BUSINESS NETWORK

53	
<i>Introduction.....</i>	54
<i>State Level.....</i>	54
<i>Regional Level</i>	54
<i>National Level</i>	54

STRATEGIC DRIVER: LEADERSHIP.....	55
<i>Leadership at the State Level.....</i>	56
<i>Leadership at the Regional Level</i>	59
<i>Leadership at the National Level</i>	61

<i>Leadership amplified through CSAVR</i>	62
STRATEGIC DRIVER: STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT	65
<i>Marketing Strategy Development</i>	65
<i>Business Services Development Strategy</i>	67
<i>Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Strategy</i>	68
HUMAN RESOURCES.....	69
<i>Human Resources at the State Level.....</i>	70
<i>Human Resources at the Regional level</i>	72
<i>Human Resources at the National Level</i>	73
<i>Education, Training, and Technical Assistance</i>	74
PROCESS MANAGEMENT	76
<i>Processes at the State Level</i>	77
<i>Processes at the Regional Level.....</i>	79
<i>Processes at the National Level.....</i>	80
INFRASTRUCTURE	81
<i>Infrastructure at the State Level</i>	81
<i>Infrastructure at the Regional Level</i>	82
<i>Infrastructure at the National Level.....</i>	83
PROTOCOLS FOR VR-BUSINESS NETWORKS	84
<i>Foundational Principles and Protocols.....</i>	85
<i>Foundational Network Principles Already</i>	
<i>Working in VR Agencies</i>	87
<i>Summary</i>	88
<i>Self-Study Questions</i>	89
CHAPTER FIVE: BUILDING BLOCKS OF A MATURE SYSTEM: PROGRESSION STEPS FOR VR AS “ONE COMPANY”	91
<i>Introduction</i>	91
<i>The Six Critical Components of the VR-Business</i>	
<i>Network</i>	92
<i>Customer Focus</i>	93
<i>Leadership</i>	95
<i>Strategy Development and Implementation</i>	98
<i>Human Resources</i>	100
<i>Processes</i>	102
<i>Infrastructure (IT and Resources)</i>	103
<i>Where the Rubber Meets the Road – Quality</i>	
<i>of Service</i>	105
<i>Building Consistency from Variety</i>	105
<i>Measuring Success: Results Improve the Process</i>	106
<i>Communication</i>	107
<i>Marketing</i>	109
<i>Business Development</i>	110

<i>Training and Technical Assistance</i>	112
<i>Putting it All Together – Maturity Scales.....</i>	113
<i>Permissions and Acknowledgements</i>	116
<i>Study Questions for Chapter Five.....</i>	118
CHAPTER SIX: PARTNERSHIPS AND THE NETWORKS	119
<i>Introduction.....</i>	119
<i>State Rehabilitation Councils (SRC).....</i>	120
<i>Projects with Industry</i>	121
<i>Independent Living Centers</i>	122
<i>Business Groups.....</i>	123
<i>Business Leadership Networks</i>	123
<i>Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPS).....</i>	126
<i>Department of Labor.....</i>	127
<i>Disability Advocacy Groups</i>	129
<i>National Organizations</i>	129
<i>Partners Summary: Cooperation Not Competition</i>	130
<i>Recognizing Collaboration</i>	131
<i>An Opportunity for VR.....</i>	131
<i>The Ultimate Winners—The Business and Consumer Customers.....</i>	132
<i>Self-Study Questions</i>	133
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
APPENDIX A: TOPICAL LINKS ON VR-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP “BASICS”	137
APPENDIX B: PREVIOUS IRIs RELATED TO VR-BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS	141
APPENDIX C: THE VR REGION IV STORY: THE EMPLOYMENT PARTNERS TEAM.....	145
APPENDIX D: PROGRESSION STEPS: SPOTLIGHT ON THE MATURITY JOURNEY: VERMONT VR AND SOUTH CAROLINA VR	149
APPENDIX E: PROGRESSION STEPS: THE BALDRIGE CRITERIA	157

Note from the Authors

Welcome to the 32nd Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) publication which focuses on VR-business networks. Before you begin to read and use this publication, its authors felt it would be helpful for you to have a clear idea of the intent of the document. Having received feedback from the Full Study Group of reviewing members, we realized that some of the readers of the draft of this IRI were seeking content in this publication that is either covered in previous IRI documents that address VR-business partnerships, or is not intended for this publication.

What this IRI publication *is* intended to cover:

- Building, formalizing, or expanding a VR-business network at the state, regional/multi-state, or national level;
- Dual-customer (business and individual with a disability) perspectives on the VR-business network;
- Critical network components for VR-business partnerships and the progression steps for strengthening the VR-business network;
- Supports and partnerships that impact the VR-business network.

What this IRI publication *is not* intended to cover:

- Detailed explanations of marketing principles for vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies to use when developing or maintaining a new

- contact with a potential business partner;
- An overview of the wide variety of services VR agencies could/should offer to business or how to strategically develop those services;
 - “Placement” services for VR consumers;
 - How to approach an employer and develop a sustainable partnership with the company;
 - Employer “tips” on how to work with business effectively in an initial approach by a VR representative with their business;
 - Disability management in the workplace;
 - Systems for developing jobs for, and filling vacancies with, VR consumers;

For readers who need more detailed information on specific topics related to one-on-one VR-business partnerships and services to these partners, note that Appendices A & B will provide you with a keyword or topical “search-and-link” to previous IRIs that cover much of what is not addressed in this 32nd IRI.

A Special Thanks from the Authors

During the writing and editing of this publication, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) provided technical assistance and support. Ms. Kathy West-Evans shared her expertise and leadership with members of the Primary Study Group, serving as an invaluable resource. This document was made stronger through her input and the support of the CSAVR organization.

The authors also appreciate the contributions of the South Carolina and Vermont state VR agencies. Quality benchmarks for customer driven systems were made accessible through the information that they shared.

Finally, the Primary Study Group thanks the participants in the Full Study Group for suggestions that clarified the thinking behind this publication. Following the National IRI Forum, this document took a higher form and the authors are grateful for all who contributed.

Foreword

A Call to Action: The Time is Now for VR-Business Networks

Effective partnerships between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and business have existed for many years. This IRI serves as a call to action to build upon these existing partnerships, leverage them between states and develop new relationships between VR and employers at a national level. VR agencies have had informal connections between states; *the time is now to formalize in-state and multi-state networks and to support VR's national connection to business.*

The 80 VR agencies, through the national organization of directors, have invested in the development of a national network between business and VR. As the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Director of Business Relations stated, this IRI document in combination with national VR leadership and staff support, should establish a beachhead of common ground from which we launch ourselves forward with urgency and common purpose.

- These networks must be customer driven.
- VR must function as “one company” within these networks.
- The multi-state and national networks must be formalized *now.*

The Challenge: VR Customer Expectations

State, regional and national networks between VR and business create a critical value-added component for consumers. They broaden the scope for career search opportunities and have certainly helped me approach my career transition, as a person with a disability, much more confidently. Why? Because I know there is an established relationship between VR and my employer and because I now realize that can be multi-state.

*Former VR consumer and Litigation Consultant
Wachovia Corporation
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

The Opportunity: The VR System Responds

At the 2005 Meeting of VR Points of Contact in the National VR-Business Network we heard.....

I challenge you to formalize the infrastructure needed to meet the needs of our business partners throughout the country. Together we can do this. The time is now.

*Steve Shivers, Commissioner
Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and past President, CSAVR*

At the 2005 RSA National Employment Conference 2005, we also heard....

This revolutionary approach within the classical vocational rehabilitation system accrues benefits for the individual with a disability and the employer. It can create a new working alliance where business is comfortable in coming to VR for employment consultation and recruitment of qualified workers and where VR will not hesitate to approach businesses to identify and meet their needs.”

*Emcee
RSA National Employment Conference, 2005*

What needs to happen *now* as VR formalizes its network with business?

The Call to Action

1. Deliver VR Expertise as “One Company”

The public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program is a federal-state partnership that operates through 80 state-based programs across the country, in the territories and in the District of Columbia. VR is funded under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, for the purpose of supporting the employment and independence of people with disabilities who, without VR’s assistance, would most likely remain dependent upon government subsidy programs. VR directors are committed to serving business customers as a unified entity, or “one company.”

Our national program is recognized for having systems in place to partner with business and industry to benefit both the individual with a disability and the employer. With the pressing needs faced by employers in today’s workplace environment, now is the time for us to apply the expertise exhibited at the local and state level to build our national VR-business network.

*Steve Wooderson, Director
Iowa Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Chair, CSAVR Employment
Committee*

Here is an opportunity through a VR partnership where the community resources...can all work together in a collaborative environment.

*Human Resource Representative
Raytheon Company
CSAVR Publication “Investing in America” 2005 - 2006*

2. Incorporate the Dual Customer Approach into VR Service Delivery

To be successful in the mission of achieving quality employment and careers for people with disabilities, VR MUST serve a dual customer base – people with disabilities and business. The VR program is funded to work directly with consumers who have disabilities but this outcome is not realized without the close working relationships with VR’s business customers.

Developing an understanding of business expectations and a direct connection between business, VR and consumers is key to people with significant disabilities developing realistic vocational plans, obtaining quality employment and retaining a position or advancing in their chosen career. As a former con-

sumer, VR counselor, HR manager and now a VR Corporate Consultant, I am excited about the opportunities that will be created through the development of multi-state partnerships and the national network between VR and business. What a difference this would have made for me as a consumer and VR counselor!

*John P. Evans, Corporate Consultant
Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation*

3. Respond to VR Customers as a National (One Company) System

The VR system is a national program. When working with business, VR must be seen as a national company and must respond to business as a unified entity that delivers consistent quality services across the country. This document provides feedback and strategies that the public VR system must implement to move toward this customer driven vision.

This network concept has been discussed for a while, and it's good to see it being formalized. We've partnered with VR in a number of states already, and a nationwide network would be even better.

*Human Resource Representative
Lowe's
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

A national VR-business network would be important because employers would have an opportunity to share best practices, find out what works well, and put more Americans to work.

*Human Resource Representative
AirTran Airways
CSAVR Publication "Investing in America" 2005 - 2006*

4. Leverage Resources: VR-to-VR

The beginnings of VR and business multi-state networks began for us at the RSA National Employment Conference. A terrific partnership developed between the Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission and a sister VR agency outside our region. They provided technical assistance to Ohio on the expansion and refinement of business and VR customer services over the past several years. Why re-invent the wheel when another VR agency has already done it! The network can benefit other VR agencies the way it has ours.

Connie O'Brien

Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission

5. Prepare VR Staff to Function Effectively in the Dual Customer Marketplace

RCEPs play a key role in supporting the VR agency connection to business and in training VR staff to be better prepared for working from a dual customer platform, employment ready consumers and business customers. It is vital that the formalization of the VR-business network occurs now so that the dual customer philosophy and critical messages from business can be reinforced within every level of our involvement with the state-federal VR program.

Craig R. Colvin

Univ. of TN, Region IV Rehabilitation Regional Continuing Education Program

6. Foster Collaboration in the Network among VR's Partners

As Projects with Industry (PWI) Director, I see how critical it is that the customer-driven VR-business network expands to the next level, which is multi-state and national. Projects with Industry is a natural partner for this initiative, and I look forward to the opportunities it will create for both businesses and consumers.

Hugh Bradshaw, Executive Director

VT Association of Business, Industry & Rehabilitation

The Bottom Line: The Ship is Sailing Are You on Board?

As you read this IRI document you will see opportunities for effective change. You will be challenged to be dual-customer driven. You will be asked to respond to business customers as “one company” throughout the nation. You can choose to change or not change: either choice has consequences. Will you invent the future of the VR program as it reaches out to business on behalf of its consumers or will someone else do that for you?

The opportunity is here.
The opportunity is now.
Decide.
Take action.

Chapter One

Inventing our Future: VR–Business Partnerships

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) as a Dual Customer System

Businesses or agencies that are not customer driven fail.

The public VR system receives federal and state funding to serve people with disabilities for the purpose of developing careers and obtaining an employment outcome that supports individual independence. In order to achieve these goals, VR must address the employment needs of business in the development of plans with consumers and the achievement of employment outcomes. The program is funded to serve individuals with disabilities, but the employment opportunities that lead to program outcomes are controlled by the employer. To be effective, VR must serve both the person with a disability and the business customer. The VR system is dual customer driven. VR staff are the conduit between a dual customer base – the person with the disability and the business or employer. In this role, the VR staff person helps both customers identify need, the VR products and services that meet those needs and provides ongoing support to the success of the employer-employee relationship.

The Challenge: VR is facing a philosophical shift. VR is redefining the customer base to be dual in nature—the person with a disability and the business.

The Opportunity: to align the VR system with business customers and build employer expectations into the planning process with consumers so that they have informed choice in building their career plans and access to a broader range of employment opportunities.

VR as “One Company”

The national service model for the VR-business network mirrors the strategies used by business. For example, Starbucks Coffee Company is an international business. They describe themselves as “the leading retailer, roaster and brand of specialty coffee in the world.” Starbucks functions as one company, yet they do business through a variety of company owned sites. The company’s mission and core product (coffee) are the same in each site, but the customer service, design of the store and the delivery of specialized products varies between service delivery areas based on the needs and traits of customers in that area or region. The company focus is quality customer service and coffee products; they are consistent across stores but flexible based on the customer need and community diversity, or what Starbucks calls “local relevance.”

An International Model with Local Relevance

We remain highly respectful of the culture and traditions of the countries in which we do business. We recognize that our success is not an entitlement, and we must continue to earn the trust and respect of customers every day.

*Howard Schultz
Chairman of Starbucks Coffee Company*

Companies and organizations have become increasingly “global” in their business practice. Many of VR’s business partners are doing business through a multi-state and, in some cases, even an international venue. To remain in sync with their business partners, VR is moving to a national service delivery, or one company model, where the 80 distinct VR state agencies function as a corporate entity in their interface with employers. The VR program is positioning itself to be *the* provider of employment services to business, ensuring a consistency of products and services within and between states.

As VR models their business partners nationally, the VR program is developing a network that requires the internal collaboration of the 80 state program partners in a “one company” approach to serving their external business customers. This is a key philosophical shift in the VR system. It is based on

the feedback of businesses who are seeking VR's support as a national system with consistent quality services across state lines. Though the 80 programs function at a state level, through their national leadership organization, they are committing to the provision of qualified candidates and consistent quality services to business on a national level as "one company".

The VR Niche and the Dual Customer Model

VR's Niche: Leading the Way

What is VR's role in career development and preparation? In the end, the VR program is responsible for employment outcomes. When other people make the connection to business on behalf of VR, we must ask ourselves – are we giving our customers away? What do we lose when that happens? Without the business partnership, VR loses the relationship that provides access to employment opportunities, the upfront support in career planning and informed choice. Employer involvement upfront supports individualized planning based on the realities of the workplace. The relationships also support customized opportunities for people with more significant disabilities. VR is the system that delivers the products and services and the system that is held accountable for employment outcomes. Business partners are a key player in that equation.

Business as a Customer: VR's work with business is a unique niche. VR has access to a pool of qualified applicants and has staff with specialized expertise in disability employment. VR has the flexibility to serve the business customer through an individually tailored approach, it is not menu driven. This allows VR staff to respond to a variety of business needs that include but are not limited to human resources. For example, many businesses are retaining valued employees who experience disability and are struggling to remain in the workplace. VR has assisted business and these individuals with personal support services and a variety of workplace or assistive technology that allow individuals to remain employed.

Employer Expectations in VR-Business Partnerships

VR business customers have repeatedly shared some of the most common elements of successful partnerships:

- Trust
- Reliability
- Deliverability

- Responsiveness
- Consistency
- Quality
- Sustainability
- Flexibility

Businesses have shared that they expect VR to incorporate these elements into any formalization of in-state, regional or national networks. Within this IRI, we have done just that by including many of these elements into what have been labeled “foundational principles” and addressing them in more detail in chapters 2, 4 and 5.

Consumer Customers: VR is a unique program built around the needs of an individual. The model of VR services is not menu driven. The consumer and VR counselor develop an individualized employment plan to include the services needed to eliminate or reduce the barriers to career employment and independence. In this person-focused model, the VR program collaborates with human service programs, medical services, transitioning students, higher education, workforce systems, community-based organizations and a variety of other individual support systems.

Consumer Expectations in VR-Business Partnerships

VR’s consumer customer expects VR staff to have access to employment information that is critical in vocational planning and employment. For consumers to be competitive in the labor market, VR’s vocational planning process has to be in line with business expectations. Understanding the workplace expectation upfront helps VR staff and consumers build better plans based on informed choice and achieve quality employment outcomes.

Career Planning Benefits: VR staff and consumers gain a better understanding of workforce needs and workplace expectations.

- Qualifications and required skill sets from the business perspective
- Corporate culture and the “unwritten” expectations of the workplace
- Diversity initiatives that include people with disabilities
- Career paths and upward mobility
- Information about the workplace that enhances “informed choice”

Employment Outcome Benefits: Using VR's existing relationships with business on a state, regional or national level to competitively position VR consumers in the labor market.

- Knowing the company's history in hiring people with disabilities
- Understanding the hiring process
- Access to employment opportunities in a state, region and nationally
- Reasonable accommodation process in that company
- Awareness of existing natural supports
- Support for job retention
- How to create an opportunity for upward mobility

Expectations in the VR-to-VR Connections with the Dual Customer

Experience has shown us that when partnerships with business are leveraged between VR professionals, whether within an agency, with VR partners, or in a multi-state environment, an informal set of protocols has emerged in assuring the delivery of quality services and the maintenance of the relationship between the VR contact and the business. Protocols have developed based on feedback from experienced VR staff and their business customers. Those protocols will be reviewed in more detail in a later chapter. However, baseline traits certainly include the following:

- Trust between the rehabilitation professional and the business partner
- Trust between rehabilitation professionals as they work collaboratively with business
- A willingness to share pertinent information about the business contact and adhere to business expectations
- Timely response by VR to the business need
- Delivery of quality services that have a measure of consistency from one rehabilitation partner to the other
- Respect for the proprietary relationship between the VR point of contact and the business

- Honest communication between the rehabilitation professionals involved with the business and with the business itself
- Timely feedback between VR professionals involved in joint or multi-state business contacts and the delivery of services

Business as a Customer of the National VR Network

When CSAVR convened the VR points of contact from throughout the country to begin to formalize a national network with business, these individuals defined some of the critical components or features of an effective VR-business network based on their experiences with in-state networking:

- Trust in the working relationships with VR
- Deliverability on commitments
- Consistency of services within and across state lines
- Quality products and services
- Responsiveness to business needs
- Internal infrastructure that supports a multi-state network
- Sustainability of the partnership and the service delivery network

As VR strengthens its business networks, it is important that the system market to its unique niche and market services consistently on a national level, including sharing the success of the program. VR has the opportunity to position itself proactively with the dual customer base, including consumers with disabilities and business.

Business Customers: What They Are and What They Are Not

As the public VR system moves to state, regional and a national network, it is important to understand key principles of doing business with business –

- They are our customer
- We have a responsibility to understand their needs
- The VR system must adjust its products and services to meet those needs in order to be seen as a value added partner in the business services arena

- They are not rehabilitation facilities
- They are not a funding source for special initiatives
- They are not obligated to hire from any one system or organization
- They do not hire a person based on disability or out of charity

Defining the VR Niche in the Marketplace and Controlling the Message

While some states and regions have advanced their marketing and business outreach programs, collectively the VR system has not proactively marketed its program or the success of the program in partnership with business.

Without a collective approach, other programs have taken credit for VR's productive partnerships and VR has been described as not doing their job, functioning as a silo, or being a duplicate of other programs. In essence, because VR has not proactively marketed its program, the VR message has been controlled by others and not always for the purposes of supporting VR or its customers. VR as a national system must market to both customers and to key stakeholders. The national VR-business network provides the opportunity for VR to market their business services and the success of their partnerships with business on a state, regional and national level. This proactive approach will provide the opportunity for VR to develop additional business partnerships and, in turn, employment and career opportunities for VR consumers.

What are you Marketing? What Does it Say to your Customers?

In developing a national marketing program, the VR system has to consider the dual customer base. The message to people with disabilities is different from that to business customers and other stakeholders.

With the business customer, what is VR marketing? Is VR marketing the abilities of an individual or the disability? Is VR marketing business focused services? Is VR marketing the availability of business services at a state, regional, multi-state and national level? When VR develops marketing tools are they written in the language of the business? Do they address the benefits to business? Has VR included business in the design and marketing of these materials? What is VR doing to market and deliver on its commitments to business?

Progression of the VR System: The National Network with Business

VR directors throughout the country have made a commitment to formalize and expand the network between VR and business. The membership

organization of directors, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), has dedicated staff for business partnerships and networking based on a strategic plan which includes the following description of the VR Directors' national vision.

Vision Statement:

To create a "one company" approach to serving business customers through a national VR team that specializes in employer development, business consulting and corporate relations.

Customers:

1. Business (public, private and non-profit employers)
2. State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies
3. Vocational Rehabilitation consumers

Benefits by customer category:

1. Business will have direct access to the qualified candidates and support services provided by State VR agencies on a national basis.
2. State VR agencies will have a national system for sharing employment resources, best practices and business connections.
3. VR consumers will have access to national employment opportunities and career development resources.

Key Elements of the Strategic Plan

The strategic plan supporting the development of the National VR-Business Network includes the following elements based on customer and stakeholder input:

- Communication Plan
- Marketing Plan
- Business Development Plan
- Training and Technical Assistance Plan
- Evaluation Plan

What the VR-Business Networks Are and Are Not

This IRI document focuses on VR-business partnerships at 3 different

tiers of networking:

1. In-state networks
2. Regional or multi-state networks
3. National network

Whether you are working at a local, state, or multi-state level, developing effective VR-business networks is based on the following foundations.

VR-Business Networks ARE.....

- An opportunity to leverage VR-business partnerships in-state and across state lines
- A trustworthy connection among the lead points of contact from each VR agency who will be responsive to business needs and to each other
- A sustainable program where VR delivers quality services to business with a measure of consistency across state lines
- An effort to develop career opportunities for consumers through long-term relationships with employers
- Sustained, long term VR partnerships with business, creating “repeat business” opportunities in-state and across the country
- An opportunity to move VR agencies from job development activities to business development initiatives

VR-Business Networks are NOT.....

- An attempt to dictate how a VR agency should manage its business partnerships or operate a program at the State level
- A focus on only business needs
- A singular focus on job development or job placement
- An exclusion of valued VR community partners who assist with consumer employment
- Corporate partnerships only

When VR formalizes these networks, business is already committed to be there.... Is VR ready to deliver? When VR formalizes these networks, consumers will have career opportunities expanded.... Is VR ready to offer a

comprehensive talent pool of qualified candidates?

Our Past is Paving the Way to our Future: Where VR has Been - The Foundation for Future Success

Historically, there have been a number of employer or business initiatives in the various 80 public VR programs across the country and in the U.S. territories. The efforts were focused at a state or program level, and business specialists within these VR programs connected informally.

In 1988, Michigan VR and the Region V Regional Continuing Education Program (RCEP) hosted a multi-state marketing conference focusing on VR's service delivery to a dual customer base, including business. Thirteen VR agencies—Alabama, Colorado, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas (General and Blind), Virginia (General and Blind) and Washington State—attended that initial meeting to share resources and strategies to build a national marketing and outreach program to business. VR was also actively working with Projects with Industry (PWI) programs and community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) to expand connections with business. VR also actively worked with their educational partners to include the training on job development and placement into the pre-service and in-service training programs for VR professionals.

Many of the relationships developed through the Michigan meeting continued on an informal basis. Information was used between programs in a state and at times between adjoining states, but business relations remained a part of the VR system that in many cases was seen outside of the role of the counselor, to be handled by a specialist or outside agency where placement could be purchased.

This was not the case in the Region IV. The eight state region, including VR programs in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina and Mississippi, took information and resources from the multi-state marketing meeting and applied the principles on a regional basis. Region IV has developed a strong and active Employer Partners Team (EPT) through a regional strategic plan and unified approach to business outreach.

National and Regional Employment Conferences: Since 1996 the state-federal partnership in vocational rehabilitation, with sponsorship by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation and George Washington University, has conducted five highly successful national conferences on employment. Each conference, excluding 2004, focused on sharing effective practices in employment. In 2004, a bold attempt was made to deal exclusively with the infrastructure of

the growing VR-business partnership movement. Some 32 businesses that actively partner with VR delivered the message about successful outcomes from their VR-business partnerships. Many regions of the country followed the lead from the national employment conference and have conducted similar employment conferences on alternate years from the national conference, further enhancing VR-business partnership replication.

What we have seen happen during this national employment conference is this:VR, together with business and consumers, is defining the next major evolution of the public vocational rehabilitation program.

RSA/CSAVR 2004 National Employment Conference, Emcee

RSA's Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI): Under the sponsorship of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, IRI publications over the past several years have become excellent “how to” resources for VR agencies that are in the midst of building strong VR-business connections within their own agency. There are two previous IRIs that are particularly beneficial to VR agencies in the early stages of developing VR-business partnerships: *The Name of the Game: Employment* (20th IRI) and *Developing Effective Partnerships with Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism* (23rd IRI). See Appendix B for a content overview of these two valuable resources.

Developing Effective Partnerships with Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism provides particularly helpful guidance for State VR Directors supporting the development of VR-business partnerships. See Appendix B for a content overview of this publication. Of particular note is the overview of Chapter 6, “Administrators – Are you Listening?”

The Next Step in the Evolution – Shifting from a State System or Regional Approach to a National Network

Through the years, the population of people with disabilities served by the public VR program has expanded to reflect the community need. At the same time, VR has changed in response to the needs of the business customer. In the current economic environment, VR is establishing a national initiative based on feedback from business and their needs in a global marketplace. Through a coordinated effort, the 80 VR agencies are creating a single corporate entity to more effectively interface with the corporate entities of their multi-state business partners.

The national network is evolving as the 80 state VR programs commit to

recognition of business as a customer and to a customer-driven, “one company” approach where the VR programs work as a team in response to business need, especially those with a multi-state or national presence. This approach draws upon the strengths, resources and best practices of the VR system as a resource to business, especially in the employment services arena.

Common Language – Is the Language VR Uses Defined by Customers?

Language reflects philosophy and a common vision. As the public VR system transitions toward the concept of working with a dual customer base and developing formalized networks with business, it is important to examine and adopt current terminology.

1) Dual Customer

This term describes a customer service strategy that recognizes both people with disabilities and employers or business as a customer of the VR system. Though VR agencies receive federal and state funding to provide services to people with disabilities, the agencies employment outcomes cannot be achieved without business. In essence, the VR system is responsible for connecting the skills and talents of consumers with the opportunities in the workplace provided by business. This requires a dual customer approach in the delivery of services.

2) Career vs. Job

It is about the quality of employment. The hallmark of the VR program is working with a consumer to conduct a comprehensive assessment of their situation and develop an individualized plan that results in a quality job, a career objective, or the person’s ability to retain employment. For VR consumers, it is not a “first job, any job” approach. The consumer and the VR professional consider a variety of factors related to what the individual is interested in, has aptitude for, is available in the labor market and what level of income is required to support independence. For many VR consumers, especially those with significant disabilities, an entry-level job (or one with no benefits) does not meet their need for financial support and independence. For VR to be successful in supporting a person’s move off of government subsidy programs, the preparation of the individual to obtain quality employment is critical. In planning for VR consumers to succeed as members of the nation’s work force, *employment is not an afterthought*. It is a carefully developed goal with a plan of action for achieving that goal.

3) Business vs. Employer

While businesses employ people, they do not define themselves primarily as an “employer.” They are held responsible for producing quality products or services that sell in the marketplace. Their company profit and existence depends upon this perspective. To support their position in the marketplace, VR has been able to connect and support business at many points, including human resources, facilities, diversity initiatives, staff training and development, and employer advisory programs. If we think of our business customers only as employers, we may limit our opportunities with them by singularly focusing on employment.

4) Business Development vs. Job Placement

Traditionally, the VR system has referenced “job placement” initiatives, which are defined as the development of a single job or employment opportunity. In the model of business development, the focus is on creating and sustaining long-term relationships with business that will result in multiple outcomes. These relationships, when based on trust, also allow VR to develop other opportunities with a business such as supported or customized employment, mentoring, internships or job shadowing. There is a greater return on the investment of time spent by VR staff, and this type of working relationship sets the stage for supporting long-term success and careers vs. short-term or dead-end jobs for VR consumers.

5) Designated Point of Contact

The “single point of contact” is a term that was proposed by business to define their preference of connecting with a designated person in a state as opposed to having to contact multiple people in the “VR system” to forward information on employment opportunities, obtain referrals, or get the information they need. Having a reliable point of contact was identified as particularly important with the national network when a higher-level manager or corporate staff person is making the initial connection in a state. When businesses are interested in expanding their operations to another state, they want to have access to a designated VR business specialist in that state who can coordinate and provide access to the needed services or products.

The designated point of contact system, however, does not define how the VR system works with its in-state partners. The national initiative recognizes that state VR agencies have partners and community-based programs that they network with in state to provide supports to the consumer and business customer. The designated point of contact would access that system and in most cases help connect the local level people with the appropriate human resource representative in their community.

6) Qualified vs. job ready

Job ready or employment ready are terms that the VR system uses to describe a consumer who is prepared to begin job search and obtain employment. Businesses do not use or understand this term. From the business perspective, the person is qualified. The business defines the qualifications and VR refers the qualified candidate.

7) ROI – the Return on Investment

Return on investment is a term used by business to describe the earning or return per dollar invested in a product, service or program. VR's ROI is based on a number of factors, including the taxes paid by an employed consumer and the money saved when an individual is removed from government funded programs or subsidies (e.g., Social Security).

Inventing our Future: Challenges, Consequences and Opportunities

The Challenges in the Network

- We have competition for employment opportunities.
- We consistently confront long-term attitudinal barriers about people with disabilities in the workplace.
- We have not always valued and treated business as a customer.
- We are not all at the same place in serving business as a customer.
- We are seen as a government entity, which is not always positive.

I have a secret—business does not trust government. But there's no 'gotcha' when working with vocational rehabilitation. Keep this foundation of trust in the network.

*Human Resources Representative
Washington Mutual Bank
RSA/CSAVR 2004 National Employment Conference*

The Opportunities in the Network

When the philosophy of dual customer is incorporated into the culture within a VR agency, it creates a win-win for everyone involved. The career goals and employment needs of consumers are more readily addressed. The needs of business in recruiting, retention, or in disability-specific areas are met. The expected outcomes for the VR program are achieved. The success

of VR-business networks is based on meeting the needs of both customers because when VR meets those needs, the needs of VR are met. With a focus on long term relationships with business rather than a singular goal of “placements,” successful networks have been, and continue to be, built. These long term partnerships will continue to generate positive outcomes, not just in one city or one state, but across the country.

Our expectations of employees are high, and Public VR has been very good at delivering high-performance individuals.

*Human Resource Representative
U.S. Army
CSAVR Publication “Investing in America” 2005 - 2006*

There have been a number of situations where our VR partners have come through for us and enabled us to employ people with disabilities.

*Diversity Consultant
Microsoft Corporation
CSAVR Publication “Investing in America” 2005 - 2006*

The Benefits of VR-Business Network Alliances

VR programs, consumers and business partners have already experienced the win-win outcomes from these networks that are now being formalized at the state, regional and national level.

Benefits to Business

- Direct access to a talent pool of qualified job seekers with disabilities
- Support services that support the success of employees with disabilities and their employer
- Access to a national bank of VR experts

Benefits to VR

- Leveraged partnerships with business based on existing credibility, trust and deliverability
- Opportunities to learn from each other, building on best practices
- Formalized networks at the state, regional and national level

Benefits to Consumers

- Expanded information about company culture, recruiting, retention and promotion practices
- Enhanced opportunities for informed choice
- Career opportunities in a national business arena

Coming Attractions in this IRI

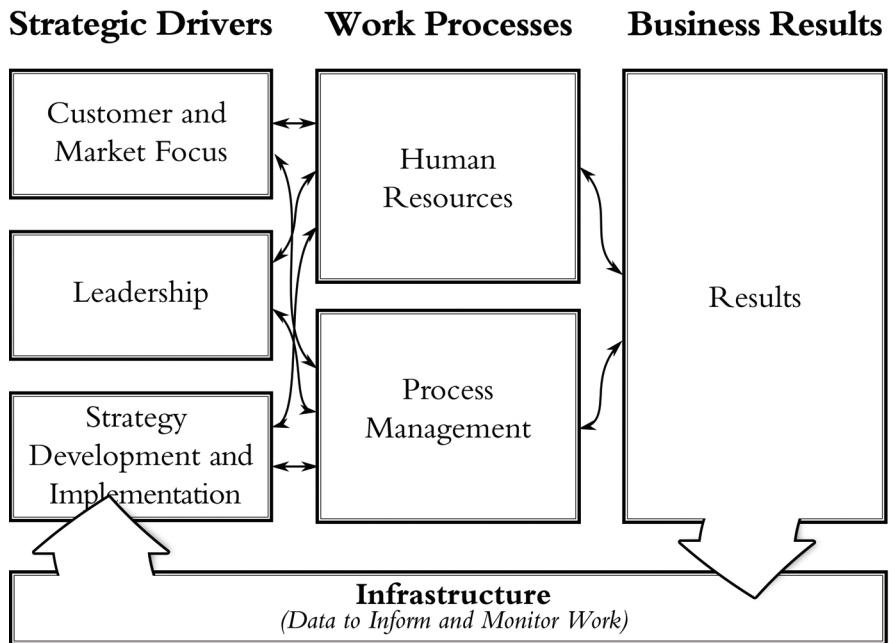
In the chapters that follow, you will be introduced to the “critical components” of an effective VR-business network and the “foundational principles” for VR-business partnerships within the network (both explained in Chapter 4). Their content has been drawn from direct customer input and from the expertise of VR professionals and VR partners throughout the country.

- In Chapters 2 and 3, you are presented with VR’s dual customer opinions and preferences regarding VR-business networks.
- Chapter 4 addresses the “critical components” of leadership, strategy development, human resources, processes and infrastructure that are necessary for the formalization of in-state, regional and national networks.
- Chapter 5 delineates the “progression steps” for effective results in formalizing or expanding VR-business networks and anticipated results from the formalization of VR-business networks.
- And finally, Chapter 6 offers VR’s rehabilitation and employment partners’ perspectives regarding the formalization of VR-business networks.

The chart on the next page depicts the important elements from the chapters that follow.

In Closing... Points to Ponder

We’ve seen that a formal network between VR and business can create employment opportunities for consumers. The key to successful outcomes will be deliverability and sustainability of the network by the VR system.... matching informed consumer choice with the employment requirements of business, and subsequently supporting the employer-employee relationship.

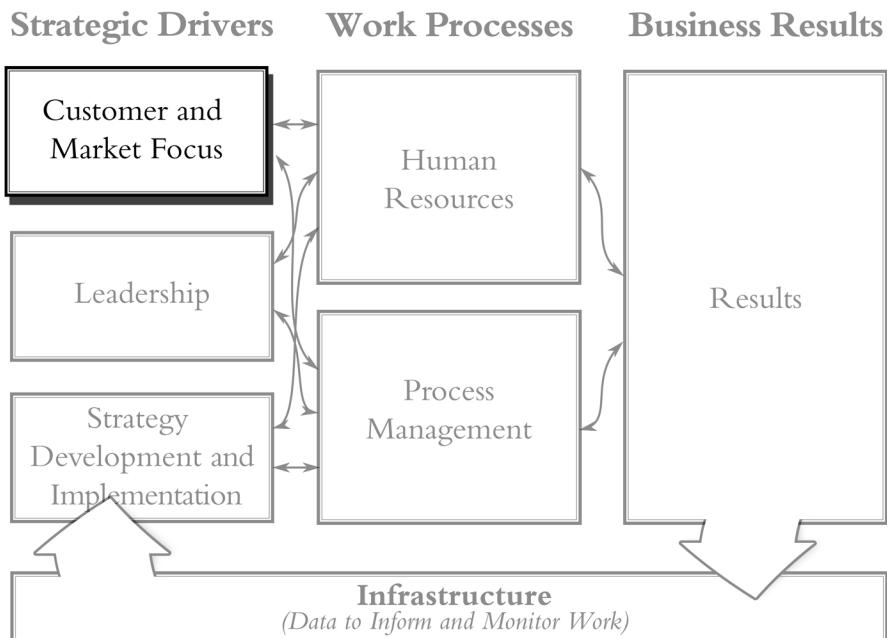


Self-Study Questions

1. The common ground from which the national VR-business network should be launched includes all of the following except:
 - a) Each VR agency must have a marketing plan
 - b) VR agencies must endorse the “VR as one company” concept
 - c) The network should be customer driven
 - d) Leveraged resources among VR agencies
2. VR business networks have all of the following characteristics except:
 - a) Primarily focused on development of jobs
 - b) Opportunities to leverage partnerships across state lines
 - c) Opportunities to move from job development to business development
 - d) The delivery of quality services to business consistently across state lines
3. VR business networks are NOT:
 - a) Corporate partnerships only
 - b) Mechanisms to raise funds for special VR initiatives
 - c) Singularly focused on business needs
 - d) All of the above
4. (T/F) In the model development of a VR-business network, the focus is on business development, not job placement.
5. (T/F) One of the targeted benefits to business resulting from the national VR-business network is electronic job matching.
6. (T/F) One of the benefits to consumers resulting from the national VR-business network is expanded information on company culture, recruiting, retention and promotion practices.
7. (T/F) One of the benefits to VR resulting from the national VR-business network is formalized networks at the state, regional and national level.

Chapter Two

Listening To Our Business Customers



With locations in over 45 states, it would be exciting to have VR resources available to all of our stores and distribution centers...what a great opportunity!

*Business Voice
Walgreens
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

Introduction

Listening to VR business customers and their suggestions about formalizing state, regional and national VR-business networks is paramount as the public vocational rehabilitation program begins to leverage its partnerships with businesses across the country. This chapter highlights direct input received during the past 18 months from these VR-business partners and incorporates their suggestions around the following network issues:

1. Creating a national VR-business network across state lines for businesses with multi-state operations;
2. Continuing to be responsive to the needs of business;
3. Formulating standards or guidelines for networks;
4. Creating networks that include a primary point of contact within VR.

In a series of direct-connects with VR business partners, key messages have emerged reflecting “Foundational Principles” for formal VR-business networks. Those principles include:

- Trust
- Responsiveness
- Deliverability
- Consistency
- Quality
- Sustainability

Throughout this document, these principles serve as a driving force and will be revisited in much of what is written in the following chapters.

What VR-Business Partners Expect from the Network

The Big Picture

1. Access to VR as a national system expanding partnerships across state lines for large and small businesses with a multi-state presence or with affiliations in trade groups.
2. Access to coordinated state, regional and national networks through primary points of contact within the VR agency, linking businesses to needed resources.

3. A network that delivers quality services with consistency across state lines.
4. Access to a comprehensive talent pool of qualified candidates.
5. Access to VR resources, best practices with business partners, and technical expertise on disability issues.
6. Deliverability of the promised goods or services to not only encompass but go beyond a talent pool of qualified candidates.
7. Quality in the delivery of services to business partners.
8. Coordinated efforts in developing VR-business partnerships when there are multiple employment resources within VR resource networks.
9. Commitment from VR leadership to the development and sustainability of these networks at the state, regional and national level.
10. Opportunities for VR to assess the responsiveness of business in network partnerships.

Quoting Our Customers: Suggestions from VR-Business Partners Regarding the Formalization of VR-Business Networks

1. Create a national VR-business network across state lines for businesses with multi-state operations and do it now. Every business interviewed about the formalization of VR-business partnerships to state, regional and national networks not only strongly supported the concept of networks, but also expressed a sense of urgency about putting the VR-Business network into operation as soon as possible. These businesses have successfully partnered with VR agencies at a local level and would very much like to expand the benefits of their local partnerships to a broader scale.

The formalization of this network is long overdue.

*The University of Alabama at Birmingham
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

A national network between VR and business would create a way for companies to copy each other's successes.

*Intel Corporation
CSAVR Conference Call with VR Business Partners, July 2004*

This network is the right thing to do because of rehab's role in putting people to work. It's cost effective to have a network like this because these services to business are already funded and available in many locations.

The Southern Company

CSAVR Conference Call with Business Partners, July 2004

2. VR must continue to be responsive to the needs of business when expanding one-on-one VR-business partnerships into networks. Time and again, dialogue with business partners reflected the element of responsiveness by VR agencies to the specific needs of business, whether it be providing access to a talent pool, helping a worker with a disability retain a job, or addressing other disability issues in the workplace.

Whenever there's been a special need by our company, VR has responded. As this network grows, it would be great for company HR representatives in other states to go directly to a VR rep in that state. This is a far more successful way to be responsive and a much better plan.

Recreational Equipment, Inc.

IRI Conference Call, December 2005

VR has been there from the very beginning, not just in a hire, but for all services we've needed. Companies don't always have that with other vendors. VR has helped us reach out beyond our state to VR contacts in other states where our company is located and the response by VR locally has been equally as valuable.

Wachovia Corporation

IRI Conference Call, December 2005

3. Formulate standards or guidelines for VR-business networks. A variety of network components and core values were suggested by business partners: relationships based on trust; standards for services to business partners; deliverability of services to business; consistency in service delivery across state lines; communication and feedback loops on network successes and challenges; leadership commitment to VR-business partnerships at the state, regional and national level.

VR might consider itself as a company vendor and there are always standards and guidelines in place for our vendors.

*Medtronic, Inc.
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

Build a foundation for this network based on established relationships. That's the key. And then communicate information about best practices from state to state." And...."There ought to be some type of report card to let companies know how they're doing as a company in this partnership, especially if it goes beyond hiring people.

*Lowe's Companies, Inc.
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

Create consistent standards on how the VR partnership would be started in each state.

*Safeway Stores
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

Some type of follow through on VR's responsiveness is needed if a company hits a non-responsive VR agency in reaching out in this network beyond the original state contact.

*Cellular One (now Alltel)
CSAVR Publication "Investing in America" 2005-2006*

4. Create networks that include a primary point of contact within VR. The most consistent message from business regarding the formalization and growth of networks between VR and business encompassed the recommendation to identify a primary VR representative with whom each business could interact. This primary point of contact was defined as a lead person from each VR agency to represent that agency in regional or national links to businesses with a multi-state presence. It also included a business preference for an in-state "local" VR single point of contact (i.e. from city to city) to streamline communication and effective partnerships within each state.

Emulate a seamless process from state to state and have a single point of contact in each state because if it's not easy to interact with VR, companies will move on to someone else who can help them.

*Blue Cross Blue Shield
CSAVR Conference Call with VR Business Partners, July 2004*

From the smaller company perspective, a single point of contact is the key. There isn't time for multiple contacts with different people.

WIMCO

CSAVR Conference Call with VR Business Partners, July 2004

The single point of contact knows the business, the standards, the timelines in recruiting...making sure that there is a consistent level of response. And consistency like that across state lines is critical.

*The University of Alabama at Birmingham
IRI Conference Call, December 2005*

Summing it All Up

These critical comments from VR's business partners reflect several key components of the network.

1. *Immediacy:* Now is the time for VR to take existing partnerships, or develop new partnerships, and formalize state, regional and national networks between VR and business.
2. *Foundational Principles:* These networks must incorporate "foundational principles" to include:
 - Trust
 - Responsiveness
 - Deliverability
 - Consistency
 - Quality
 - Sustainability
3. *Primary Point of Contact:* Business partners prefer to work through a primary point of contact in their partnerships with VR and within these networks as they are formalized or expanded.
4. *Feedback Loops:* These should be incorporated into the networks to ensure quality in service delivery to business and customer satisfaction by both business and VR.

Sourcing Our Business Partner Input

Recommendations summarized in this chapter have been drawn primarily from direct contact with VR business partners through a variety of venues: a conference call in December 2005 by the IRI prime study group mem-

bers with some of their business partners; a conference call conducted by CSAVR executive leadership in July 2004 with businesses throughout the country who partner with specific VR agencies; commentaries from VR business partners in the CSAVR publication “Investing in America” 2005 – 2006, drawn from business remarks at the RSA-CSAVR 2004 National Employment Conference. Additional input has been gleaned from IRI Prime Study Group members’ individual contacts with business partners currently involved with State Rehabilitation Councils and other VR business advisory initiatives or working partnerships.

The businesses that provided input for this IRI are but a small representation of the many companies that partner with VR throughout the country. Businesses with which we have consulted on this IRI have state their preference for contact with them through a VR designated point of contact. For this reason, their quotes only reflect the company name in order to respect the proprietary relationship between the VR point of contact and the business. Following is additional information about those quoted in this chapter.

- *Blue Cross Blue Shield:* BCBS is one of the most known and trusted names in the health insurance industry operating through an association of several different insurance companies, each representing Blue Cross in their own region, providing coverage for 1 of every 3 Americans reaching more than 88 million people.
- *Cellular One:* Recently bought out by Alltel, this is a customer focused communications company with more than 15 million customers in 36 states and nearly \$10 billion in annual revenues. From high tech development sales and service to financial accounting and upper level management positions, the Alltel team includes more than 20,000 employees worldwide.
- *Intel Corporation:* Intel is the world’s largest chip maker and also a leading manufacturer of computer, networking and communication products.
- *Lowe’s Companies, Inc.:* Lowe’s is the second largest home improvement retailer in the world, operating more than 1,250 stores in 49 states with more than 185,000 employees.
- *Medtronic, Inc.:* Medtronic is the leader in medical technology providing lifelong solutions for people with chronic pain, offering products, therapies and services that enhance or extend the lives of millions of people. It employs approximately 34,000 people worldwide.

- *Recreational Equipment, Inc.*: REI is a renowned supplier of outdoor gear and clothing with 82 retail stores in the United States. It also offers direct sales via the internet serving more than 2.4 million customers annually.
- *Safeway Stores*: Safeway is one of the largest food and drug retailers in the nation. There are approximately 1,700 Safeway Stores across the U.S and Canada offering more than 2,500 products to its customers
- *The Southern Company*: The Southern Company is one of America's largest generators of electricity operating a 120,000 square mile service territory spanning Georgia, Alabama, southeastern Mississippi and the Florida panhandle with more than 26,000 employees.
- *University of Alabama at Birmingham*: UAB is the largest single-site employer in the state of Alabama incorporating both a hospital and university complex and employing some 18,700 people.
- *Wachovia Corporation*: Wachovia is the 4th largest bank in the U.S. operating in 16 eastern and southern states with some 97,000 employees. It provides personal services and advice through 3,159 financial centers and 730 retail brokerage offices.
- *Walgreens*: Walgreens is the nation's largest retail pharmacy chain with 5,222 stores in 45 states and more than 179,000 employees in 2005. It serves more than 4 million customers, chainwide, each day.
- *Washington Mutual*: “WaMu” is one of America's leading retailers of financial services for consumers and small businesses. It currently operates more than 2,600 retail banking, mortgage lending, commercial banking and financial services throughout the nation.
- *WIMCO*: Webb Interactive Marketing Company, based in Ohio, offers business marketing solutions via marketing research, updated customer lists, qualifying decision makers, satisfaction surveys and much more to a national customer base.

Summary

How VR chooses to respond to these business partners' suggestions as each agency continues to formalize their networks at the state, regional and national level is key to the development and growth of VR-business networks and to successful employment outcomes for VR consumers. Incorporating

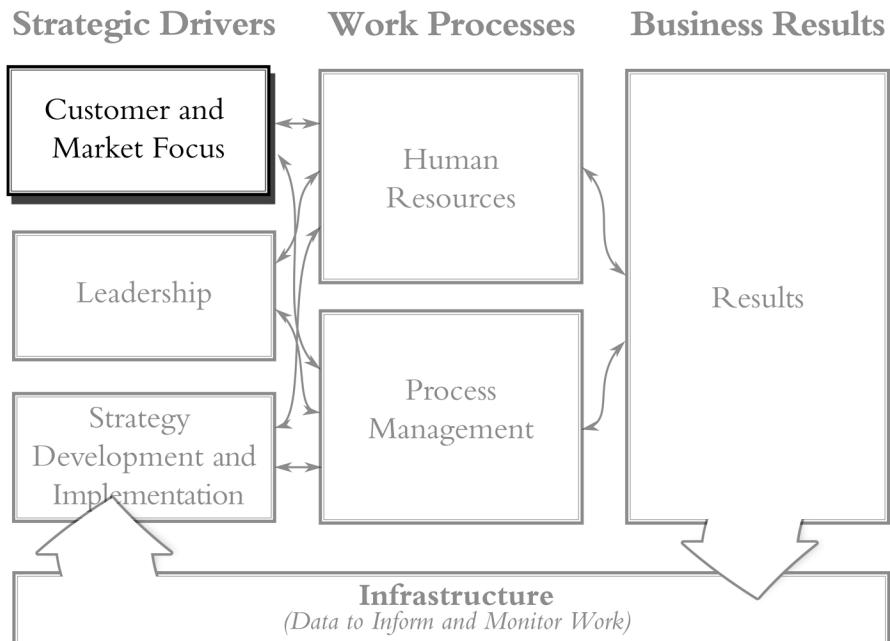
the “foundational principles” that have been identified in this chapter, and that are addressed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, is a critical focus as networks are formalized or expanded. How VR responds to VR based on these “foundational principles” creates the opportunity to build on the concept of “VR as one company” already explained in Chapter 1.

Self-Study Questions

1. The foundational principles identified by business as key elements of the national VR-business network are:
 - a) Trust among partners
 - b) Responsiveness to customers
 - c) Deliverability of services
 - d) Consistency in service deliverability
 - e) All of the above
2. Businesses expect a VR-business network to function at the following levels: (check all that apply)
 - a) In-state
 - b) Regionally
 - c) Multi-state
 - d) Nationally
 - e) All of the above
3. (T/F) Businesses expect VR to be responsive to their needs that extend beyond recruiting for job vacancies.
4. (T/F) Businesses expect core standards or guidelines within a VR-business network.
5. (T/F) Businesses do not expect to work with a single or primary point of contact within VR, but are happy to work with many VR staff.
6. (T/F) Businesses feel a sense of urgency to have the VR-business network in place as soon as possible.

Chapter Three

Linking Consumer Choice to the VR-Business Network



Introduction

This chapter focuses on how the VR-Business network can support consumer choice in the vocational rehabilitation process and assist consumers in their employment search and career development.

Supporting Consumer Choice

The establishment of a VR-business network that fosters relationships between VR professionals and employer representatives will result in information and opportunities for hiring and retention of people with disabilities. These networks can become a powerful addition to existing information, tools and approaches that VR professionals traditionally use. The power of the network is that it can build upon the experience and successes of employees within a company and thereby increase the chance of success for VR consumers seeking similar employment. AVR-business network can provide VR professionals with information about the diversity of companies and employment trends, information about essential job functions, hiring practices, and company-based opportunities for career growth. This information can then be used to empower the individual with disability to choose the employment or career path of their choice.

Planning For Employment

To develop an individual plan for employment that supports the purpose and intent of consumer choice, both the VR professional and consumer need to understand the difference between a job and a career. They should also have an understanding of what steps can be taken to increase the chance of success in each area.

The responsibility of the VR professional toward informed choice within the VR process is to evaluate, counsel, and develop a plan of action that will enable the consumer to achieve an employment outcome, whether it is a job or a career. More VR professionals are realizing that in order to assist significantly disabled consumers to achieve the goal of self-sufficiency, they must interact closely with representatives of the labor market, collect vocational information that reflects a constantly changing labor force, share labor market information that reflects current work force demands, and provide support services to both the consumers with disabilities and employers. If they are to increase the number of consumers with disabilities entering into and sustaining jobs or careers, VR professionals must increase their understanding of how individual businesses operate to hire qualified applicants and what supports are available to retain productive employees. VR professionals and their consumers can increase the likelihood for success by becoming as familiar as possible with business and industries, their products or services, their work force requirements, their corporate identity and their day-to-day business operations.

The VR-business network will provide VR consumers with a better means of making informed choices since the networks are specifically designed to

meet the needs of consumers with disabilities and businesses interested in hiring this population. VR-business networks will provide a thorough understanding of the challenges and opportunities a VR consumer might likely encounter while seeking employment. They will also provide a consumer with a better understanding of the requirements that a business has regarding retention and promotion. By empowering consumer choice with business practice information, VR professionals are preparing consumers to be responsible for their decisions and as ready as possible when they approach a business for employment opportunities. By being knowledgeable of an employer and their operations, consumers will have a greater chance of taking responsibility for their actions in obtaining a job and jump-starting a career.

Supporting the Business

A VR-business network provides an avenue for VR professionals to educate businesses about the availability and advantages to hiring people with disabilities, as well as the benefits of assistive technology and reasonable accommodation for enabling successful job performance. A network can help transition the consumer into the workplace, provide a resource base for intervening or resolving barriers to job performance, and create acceptance and sensitivity among co-workers. Trusting relationships and positive experiences not only increase consumer success, but also lead to opportunities for other consumers with disabilities within the company or industry.

ON YOUR MARK – Targeting the Right Business

If I only knew which employer would seriously consider hiring me. I can't afford to lose my SSI and medical benefits over just any job.

Randall E.

VR professionals and consumers team to develop a structured individualized plan for employment (IPE), addressing two key elements in the rehabilitation process – the reduction or elimination of vocational or independent living barriers created by the disability, and the services required to support the consumer's success in their employment search or career development. The IPE should identify the steps necessary for getting a job, and also address the potential workplace barriers that could result from the consumer's choice of occupation, industry, or place of employment. VR professionals and consumers can benefit in the planning process and increase chances for a successful employment outcome by having immediate access to business information during the development and implementation of the IPE. For

the IPE to have the greatest benefit, VR professionals must have a good understanding of the needs of their consumers as well as the needs or requirements of the business.

Providing business information that will prepare a consumer to be “employment ready” is an important responsibility of the VR professional. During the different phases of the vocational planning and placement process, consumers should be provided with information about a business or industry in order to increase the element of informed choice. Business-specific information should enable a better match between consumers and the employment setting they are seeking. There are many factors to consider in determining if consumers are employment ready. VR professionals and consumers could enhance the status of employment readiness by using state, regional, and national networks to assist them in formulating answers to the following questions that are often important to consumers with significant disabilities:

- Is the industry, employer or work setting within the consumer’s choice of employment?
- What knowledge, skills, experience, certifications or degrees are necessary for an employee to be successful while working at this business?
- Is the consumer able to meet the business’s attendance, productivity, health and safety, or work place conduct requirements?
- What type of corporate culture does the business have? Is this consistent with the consumer’s interest and well being?
- What worker traits or skills sets are most important to the business?
- Where is the business located (headquarters, other locations)?
- What entry level employment options are available through the business?
- What career ladder options are available through the business?
- Is there a history of, and/or existing VR relationship with this business?
- Are there other individuals with disabilities employed at this business?
- Is this business actively involved in recruiting people with disabilities?

ties?

- Is there a human resource infrastructure within the business to be aware of (recruiter, diversity coordinator, accommodation designee, affirmative action coordinator, etc.)?
- Does the business offer pay and benefits that will enable the consumer to achieve or maintain self-sufficiency?

GET SET – Preparing Consumers for the Hiring Process

I can't hide my disability in a job interview, what more can I do to get and keep a job?

Matt W.

Preparing the VR consumer to succeed in a job interview often requires that he/she understand what steps are needed participate in the interview, and how to explain or demonstrate his/her ability to perform the positions essential job functions. How much structure to build into the steps will vary depending on the consumer's level of functionality, skills, education, work experience, independence, and comfort the person has conducting employment interviews . To help identify what steps are necessary to expedite the employment search and placement process, a VR-business network could offer assistance by providing answers to the following questions:

- What is the hiring process of the business?
- Are there tips or proven strategies for getting into the company?
- Is there a point of contact within the business for VR professionals or applicants with disabilities to connect with for information or assistance?
- Are there opportunities for informational interviews, job carving, job shadowing, volunteering, job trials or OJT?
- What is the process for acquiring reasonable accommodation in the hiring process?
- What avenues are there for resolving issues or conflicts that may occur in the hiring process?
- Are there other avenues not normally available to the general public (i.e. Schedule A – federal government) for entering into employment

with the business?

- What questions concerning standards for attendance, health & safety, workplace conduct, and productivity might come up during the hiring process?

GO – Guiding Consumers toward Success

Will VR or my employer support me when I need help on the job?

Christine A.

Supporting the consumer after placement to ensure job retention, move up a career ladder within the company and enable the individual to achieve self-sufficiency is often the final focus of an IPE. The success of this stage in the vocational rehabilitation process will in many cases complete the VR professional's responsibility to the consumer and lead to a successful case closure. By the time a consumer begins employment, the VR professional will have spent a significant amount of time and resources preparing the consumer to become employed. If consumers have the ability to obtain and/or retain employment over an extended time period, live independently in their community, experience the personal and career growth of the consumers' choice, then the VR professional has done a successful job of vocational rehabilitation. Information about how a business operates internally, made possible by a VR-business network, can help consumers sustain employment and achieve personal or career growth. Answers to the following questions could help to ensure an integrated and productive work setting:

- Have employees within the business been trained in disability awareness?
- Are there natural supports available in the business?
- Are there support services (employee advisory group) in the business that the consumer can connect with?
- How, where, or with whom does the consumer address conflict in the workplace?
- What mechanisms are in place for addressing consumer isolation in the work place?
- Are there upward mobility or career ladder opportunities and pro-

cesses the consumer needs to be aware of?

- How does the employee request reasonable accommodations to enable job performance?
- Does the business have information on community, technological or financial resources to support the consumer?

Summary

The establishment of state, regional, and national VR-business networks will provide VR professionals with the knowledge and expertise necessary to provide the best services to their consumers they can regarding employment trends, essential job functions, hiring practices and opportunities for career growth. Within state, regional, and national VR-business networks, VR professionals will also be able to provide valuable information and support services that would lead to quality jobs for consumers, and qualified staff for employers.

VR-business networks can help VR professionals structure successful outcomes by preparing consumers to be employment ready, targeting business that are willing and able to provide employment opportunities to the type of consumers the VR system serves, and helping consumers achieve self-sufficiency through jobs and careers.

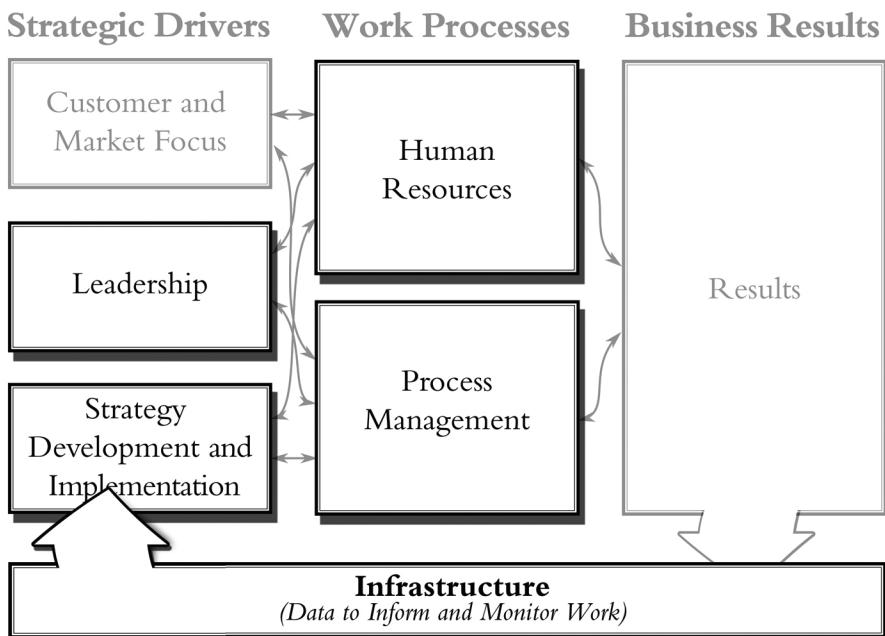
Self-Study Questions

1. The VR-business network will enhance informed choice for consumers by
 - a) Providing information on the requirements business has regarding retention and promotion
 - b) Providing information on the corporate culture
 - c) Providing information on the knowledge, skills, experience, and education necessary for an employee to be successful in that business
 - d) Providing information on pay and benefits
 - e) All of the above
2. The VR-business network will help prepare consumers to succeed in job interviews by providing VR counselors and consumers with information on
 - a) A point of contact within the business with whom applicants can connect for information or assistance
 - b) Information on avenues not normally available to the general public for entering into employment with that business
 - c) Whether or not to reveal a hidden disability
 - d) Both A and B
 - e) All of the above
3. Information about how a business operates internally, made possible by a VR-business network, can help consumers sustain employment and achieve career growth by
 - a) Providing information about how, where and with whom to address conflict in the workplace
 - b) Indicating whether natural supports are available in the business
 - c) Informing consumers how to request reasonable accommodations
 - d) Providing information on what VR will pay for
 - e) A, B and C
4. (T/F) The Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) address two key elements in the rehabilitation process: the elimination of barriers created by the disability and the services required to support the consumer's success in his or her employment search or career path.

5. (T/F) In order to assist significantly disabled consumers to achieve self-sufficiency, VR professionals must interact closely with representatives of the labor market.

Chapter Four

Framework for Building the VR - Business Network



This network concept has been discussed for a while and it's good to see it being formalized. We've partnered with VR in a number of states already and a nationwide network would be even better.

Lowe's Companies, Inc. IRI Conference Call, December 2005

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the INTERNAL organizational components necessary to build and expand the VR-business networks. This blueprint serves to provide an outline of the necessary components at the three levels of the VR-business networks – state, regional, and national. Within the networks, at any level, these components work in tandem to achieve the maximum results.

This chapter concludes with protocols that exemplify the foundational principles (identified in Chapter 1). These principles become agreed upon protocols that increase effectiveness and credibility within the networks. The principles shape how we do business.

What do the networks look like at the state, regional and national levels?

State Level

The VR-business network is founded on collaboration between state, regional and national partners. It is a “one company” vision that brings the strengths of the public VR system to enhance its work with business. It is a web of interdependence. This does not mean that all state agencies look and operate the same. This is an important point – individual state agencies differ in staffing patterns, organizational structure, work flow processes, and unique state issues. Whatever the individual variance, the ability to produce consistent results in serving the dual customer is essential to enhancing the foundational strength of the VR-business network.

Regional Level

At the regional level, state agencies are collaborating with one another and with businesses across state lines. The state designated point of contact serves as the primary conduit for collaboration. Currently there are several regional networks either actively operating or in the initial formation stages. These networks have proved successful in leveraging resources and business partnerships in a variety of ways. The regional level should have flexibility to operate and expand boundaries based on need. It is a structure that enables and supports VR to maximize resources and services across state lines.

National Level

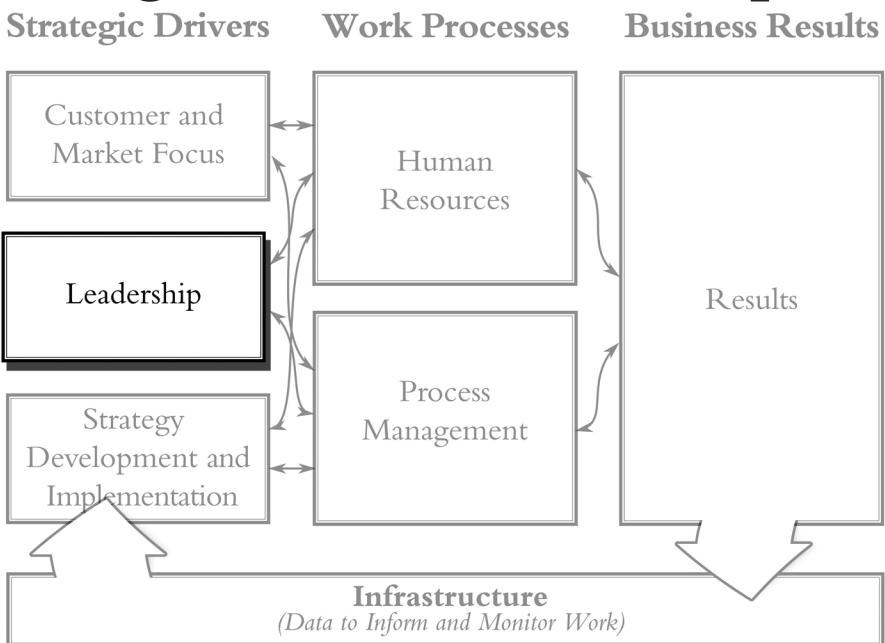
The network expands to a national venue as the states and regions further interconnect across the country to maximize resources and capacity to grow a network of business relationships. A unified strong response to business is possible across the entire expanse of VR agencies – coast to coast and

throughout the territories. The benefits are realized in this expanded web of possibility and opportunity.

This is a classic *win-win partnership*: VR-to-VR and VR-to-business. This multi-level approach will increase benefits and return on investment for the consumer, the business and the nation. The national network will enable VR to grow business relationships, maximize staff resources, and leverage business partnerships on a national level between like structures in business and the VR system.

What will it take to grow and expand the VR-business network? Let's start at the top – LEADERSHIP!

Strategic Driver: Leadership



We live in changing and challenging times with a need for different strategies. We cannot expect different outcomes using the same approaches to complex issues and needs. We cannot expect different outcomes in a dual customer driven system if we remain focused on just one customer. The methods we propose require that leaders assess their approach to serving dual customers and be open to the adoption of NEW ways of achieving results and maximizing effort results. We have a chance to expand on the return on investment by showing how vital VR partnerships are to business, to our state and most importantly to our consumer customers. Leadership must take a stand for the past, current and future generations in vocational rehabilitation.

Executive level leadership in the public VR system chart the course, provide the vision and set the culture and climate for each agency to contribute to the public VR mission. Leadership throughout each state agency, from state office to front-line supervisors, must embrace, implement and promote the leadership direction throughout the agency. The chain of agency leadership is as strong as its individual links working in tandem with a jointly understood and consistently executed vision.

Leadership must make a visible *commitment* to producing consistent, effective results. Leadership must further their dedication to strengthening VR credibility and value across the nation. Is this not the essence of leadership? We must together as leaders confront status quo, attract people to a common purpose, build a common vision across the program, take risks and challenge all of us to work as a unified force, as “one company,” in a changing world.

In this section leadership will be discussed at the state, regional and national levels, focusing on state agency executive leadership, middle management, the designated point of contact and national leadership through CSAVR.

Leadership at the State Level

State Agency Executive Leadership

- Plans strategically to accomplish organizational outcomes using an informed and integrated system of involvement from staff, consumers, employers, and partners
- Involves appropriate sources in the development and implementation of strategic plans as needed to enhance effectiveness (staff, partners, consumers and businesses)
- Visibly promotes and demonstrates the value of dual customers to achieving organizational goals and outcomes
- Ensures internal processes support successful outcomes with both customers
- Ensures mechanisms are in place for internal VR staff to share information and resources throughout the agency, state-wide
- Ensures staffing and resources are appropriate to serve both customers
- Visibly values and demonstrates meeting business needs to increase the number and type of employers that are knowledgeable, informed,

comfortable, willing and ready to employ, retain and promote people with disabilities

- Supports the design of a variety of services for business based on business specified needs
- Promotes relationship building with business to produce long-term mutually beneficial relationships
- Participates in peer relationship building with employers (CEO to CEO) as appropriate
- Communicates, celebrates and recognizes successes and efforts of staff on behalf of employer customer
- Appoints a designated point of contact to liaison at the state, regional and national levels (The point of contact is further defined in the Human Resource section of this chapter)
- Maintains an open line of communication with the designated state point of contact (POC has access to executive leadership)

State Agency Middle Management

- Set and clearly articulate expectations of staff that support meeting business disability-related needs and consumer needs
- Ensure communication is open and shared between staff about business, labor market information, opportunities, future trends/needs, consumer needs and abilities, etc.
- Ensure employment information is incorporated early in serving the consumer customer from intake throughout the vocational assessment and the development of an IPE to employment
- Apply resources to addressing business needs
- Understand the urgency to respond to business concerns/needs and ensure that response is immediate
- Constantly identify and eradicate barriers to effectively serving dual customers
- Communicate with other managers to enhance understanding of serving dual customers, promote consistent services and leverage

existing and new best practices

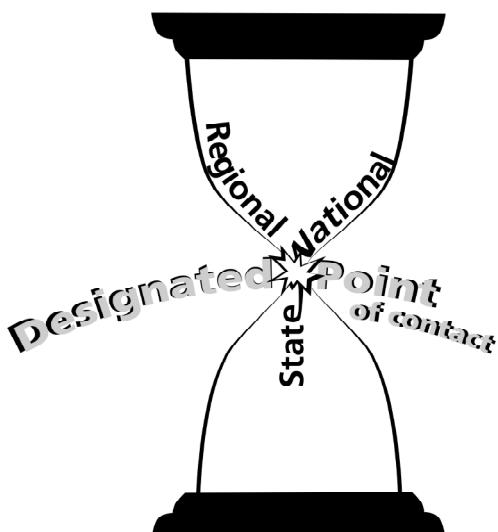
- Promote a climate that is supportive of both customers
- Celebrate successes and acknowledge performance that supports the organization's direction
- Understand and visibly support the role of designated point of contact at the state and local level
- Support activities that enhance partnerships with employers

The capacity and effectiveness of the leadership within an agency to foster an in-state network linking VR staff to VR staff and VR to business determines the bottom line. For more in-depth information about the role of leadership in developing the dual customer focus, refer to Chapter 6, "Successful Partnerships: Administrators Are You Listening," 23rd IRI, *Developing Effective Partnerships with Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism*. (Fry, 1997)

The Designated Point of Contact

Business has indicated the need for a specified point of contact for the VR network. From an organizational structural view, a VR-business network comprised of so many (80) individual rehabilitation agencies requires a designated representative from each agency to represent the interest and needs of the agency and its dual customer base throughout the network at all levels. This position has become known as the designated point of contact as the network is expanding. The designated point of contact is a critical role that ties all three levels of the VR to VR and VR to business network together.

This designated point of contact has two strong functions. The first function is to work within their own VR state agency to foster a coordinated in-state network serving the business customer and meeting organizational goals. The second function is to face outward toward other state agencies across the nation to represent their state and form strong relationships with other points of contact to leverage partnerships and resources for maximum



benefit. As in the narrow middle of an hour glass, the designated point of contact is the point where information disperses through the network—in both directions.

The Designated Point of Contact at the State Level

- Is appointed by the executive state leader
- Has expertise and experience in establishing relationships with business/industry and organizations
- Has support of and open access to top leadership
- Has access and strong relationships throughout the entire organization (state office/field)
- Coordinates VR-business partnerships within the VR agency and, if possible, with partner agencies
- Has a good working knowledge of internal business-focused staff and resources
- Supports an internal infrastructure for sharing information, seeking opportunities, and acting on those opportunities throughout the agency on business relations
- Identifies and designs services based on business needs
- Identifies and provides training needs of staff or coordinates training with internal agency resources
- Serves as a central point of contact for internal state agency staff

Leadership at the Regional Level

State Agency Executive Leadership

- Promotes the dual customer focus and value of the business customer with other executive VR leaders
- Shares potential regional leveraging opportunities with peers
- Supports communication and activities cross-state. Leadership is willing to:
 - Provide opportunities for networking cross-state

- Support regional employment activities
- Support point of contact meetings
- Support involvement of business with VR points of contact
- Support the sharing of internal materials and resources such as training materials, consultations, marketing materials, effective processes and practices
- Work in collaboration with other regional leaders to provide resources for networking support such as: Web sites, chat rooms, listserves, teleconferencing and Web meetings

The Designated Point of Contact at the Regional Level:

- Serves as a liaison with other designated points of contact within the region
- Builds trusting relationships with other regional VR designated points of contact
- Is the entry point of out-of-state inquiries
- Utilizes the network to leverage employer relationships
 - Shares resources/knowledge cross-state
 - Network becomes a problem solving team
- Shares regional resources with internal state agency staff
- Keeps executive leader (state director) informed of outcomes, activities, successes, and needs
- Identifies businesses and industries with a multi-state presence within the region, as well as corporate and regional offices within the region
- Expands relationships with regional corporate staff
- Provides the interface between regional business information and local staff
- Creates/shares regional trainings designed to support the business network services and protocols

- Participates in state, regional, or national business organizations and associations to take advantage of networking and training opportunities
- Is the key for in-state staff to benefit from regional partnering

Leadership at the National Level

State Agency Executive Level Leadership

- Visibly value personal involvement in building the national network
- Disseminate best practices
- Visibly value involvement of designated point of contact in building the national network
 - Support opportunities for relationship building among points of contact.
 - Ensure participation of point of contact in national network activities
 - Ensure a platform for information and communication exchange
- Ensure executive VR state agency leadership or their designated point of contact actively serves on the employment sub-committee of CSAVR
- Willing to participate in business outreach activities (CEO-to-CEO) as appropriate
- Visibly value national corporate level relationship with business/industry
- Collectively determine an agreed-upon, deliverable national core set of services responding to business needs

The designated point of contact operating at the National Level will be expected to:

- Expand relationship building with points of contact beyond regional level throughout the nation
- Participate in national meetings (CSAVR, employment committee;

- employment conferences, etc)
- Share/seek resources and information
 - Identify corporate business headquarters located within state
 - Participate in national business-related initiatives
 - Oversee VR's responsiveness within the state to businesses referred to them from the national network

Leadership Amplified through CSAVR

In the Introduction, a national vision and strategic plan were outlined in response to customer needs (business, consumer and VR staff). The VR State Executive leadership have propelled and supported the formalization of a VR business network. Through the auspices of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the state directors have not only endorsed the development of the national VR-business network, they are immersed in making this network grow and flourish. At the time of this writing, there are many examples of this network in action – meeting the needs of business and consumers.

CSAVR has added a Business Relations Director to their staff to facilitate the infrastructure of a national network. Working in concert with state agencies, both executive leadership and designated points of contact, the Business Relations Director will facilitate the achievement of the strategic goals. This includes obtaining and designing Web-based communication tools for VR agencies to promote communication: from the ability to communicate with ease among the designated points of contact to sharing effective practices and training resources to creating and implementing a marketing plan; to creating detailed profiles of businesses eager to do business with VR. Opening avenues and making connections at the corporate level of business, the Business Relations Director fosters the widening of the VR-business network.

Another internal support component contributing to the national VR-business network is that of the CSAVR Employment Committee. For the last several years this committee has grown exponentially. Strong leadership from within CSAVR (visionary state directors) along with a complement of other key players have accomplished much in solidifying this initiative. Specifically, the Employment Committee and active participation on the Employment Committee can significantly enhance the connection to the national network. This committee acts as a key advisory element for the network.

Leadership is indeed a strategic driver in the growth of the VR Business network. James Kouzes and Barry Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* (2002) have identified five practices of exemplary leadership for today and the world of tomorrow. Can we in the publicVR system challenge ourselves to utilize these practices to forge a truly dedicated dual customer driven VR-business network?

- **Model the Way**

Leadership sets the course for creating and sustaining the VR Business network in both words and action

- **Inspire a Shared Vision**

Leadership paints a vivid picture of the value and benefit of building a viable VR Business network

- **Challenge the Process**

Leadership challenges whether the work currently being done supports the dual customer and constantly seeks ways to improve

- **Enable Others to Act**

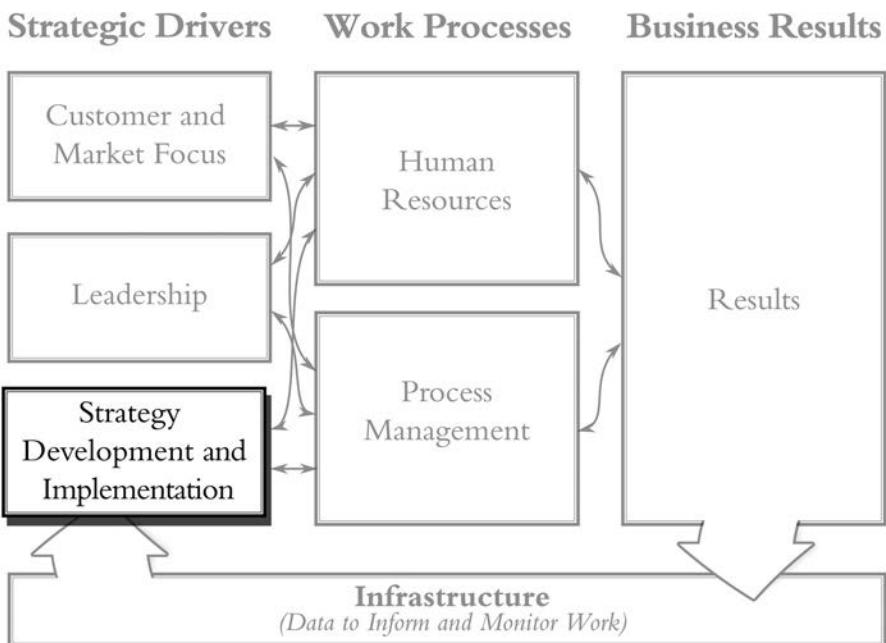
Leadership provides the support to staff in resource allocation, feedback, infrastructure to enable VR staff to serve dual customers effectively

- **Encourage the Heart**

Leadership celebrates the small successes as well as the large successes within all levels of the network as the network grows and yields results and treats mistakes as learning opportunities to grow in the future

Marketing Strategy Development	State Network	Regional Network	National Network
Promote Single Brand Identity	Within state as 'one company'	Across region as 'one company'	Nationally as 'one company'
Incorporate economic conditions, industries, and cultural diversity dynamics	Specific to state	Specific to region	Nationally
Expand existing business partnerships and target new business partnerships. Utilize labor market information to target growth industries for market penetration	Within state	Across state lines, leveraging regional corporate business contacts	Nationally, focusing on the business corporate level or national association level
Maximize VR agency resources targeting employment and business	Within state, including in-state partner structure	Leverage VR expertise across state lines	Leverage VR expertise nationally
Market identified services to business that are deliverable and sustainable	Within state	Across the region	Across the nation
Design and distribute marketing materials that can be customized for individual accounts or services. Utilize a variety of media (print, internet, mailings, networks, etc.) to reach business customers	Within state	Across the region	Across the nation
Incorporate a feedback loop to communicate labor market information and business information/issues to VR staff and disability related workforce development trends to business.	Within state	Across the region	Across the nation
Assess the effectiveness of the marketing plan via business awareness and satisfaction	Within state	Across the region	Across the nation
Track and report the impact of marketing activities related to VR consumers going to work or keeping a job.	Within state	Across the region	Across the nation

Strategic Driver: Strategy Development



Strategy development will enable the national, regional, and state networks to tactically design and manage services and actions. Three areas imperative to success are discussed in this section: marketing, business services, and continuous quality improvement.

Marketing Strategy Development

The successful marketing strategy for the national, regional, and state employment networks will result in business and consumer customers connecting with VR based on the reputation of VR as the experts in disability employment issues. The successful marketing strategy requires that VR regularly communicate with business about available services and be responsive to emerging business/consumer needs. This marketing strategy treats each business as an “account.” This account is a formal business relationship where both partners – VR and the business – are in an exchange of services, each providing value to the other party to meet their needs.

Business Services Strategy Development	State Network	Regional Network	National Network
Business services are developed in response to the needs of businesses and VR consumers	Business services are developed within the state	Business services are identified that can be provided by all the agencies in the region, i.e., a common service menu	Business services are identified that can be delivered throughout the country, i.e., a common service menu.
Services are delivered and coordinated in a consistent manner	In-state with partners	Across the region coordinated through the designated POCS	Across the nation coordinated through the designated POC and the national lead
Ensure services are of high quality as evaluated by business	Within the state	Across the region	Across the nation
Leverage budget and VR staff resources dedicated to the provision of business services	Within the state	Across state lines as appropriate through the designated POC	Across the nation as appropriate through the designated POC and national lead
Provide ongoing support to business accounts	Within the state	Support business accounts throughout the region through the designated POC	Accounts throughout nation through the designated POC and national lead
Ensure access to a talent bank of VR candidates for jobs	Within the state	Across the region	Across the nation

Business Services Development Strategy

Defining services available to business and consumers in the national, regional, and state employment networks supports the foundational principles. Services are responsive to the needs of the dual customer. Services are consistent throughout the networks and are of high quality. The networks commit the resources to provide services resulting in deliverability.

Service expansion is responsive to dual customer needs. By way of example, consider these services currently offered by many agencies successfully to business:

- Diversity Training (example: Windmills)
- Assisting business with recruitment and hires
- Disability Management (example: Retention of existing workforce affected by disability)
- ADA consultation and training
- Rehabilitation technology
- State and federal financial incentives
- On the Job Training and Job Tryouts
- Job Coaching
- Follow up

VR business services are not limited to this list. As new needs are identified, services may be designed to fill those needs and shared within the networks, expanding both the service and value of VR to business. The points of contact, VR staff and partners in the national, regional, and state levels of the network provide and coordinate services.

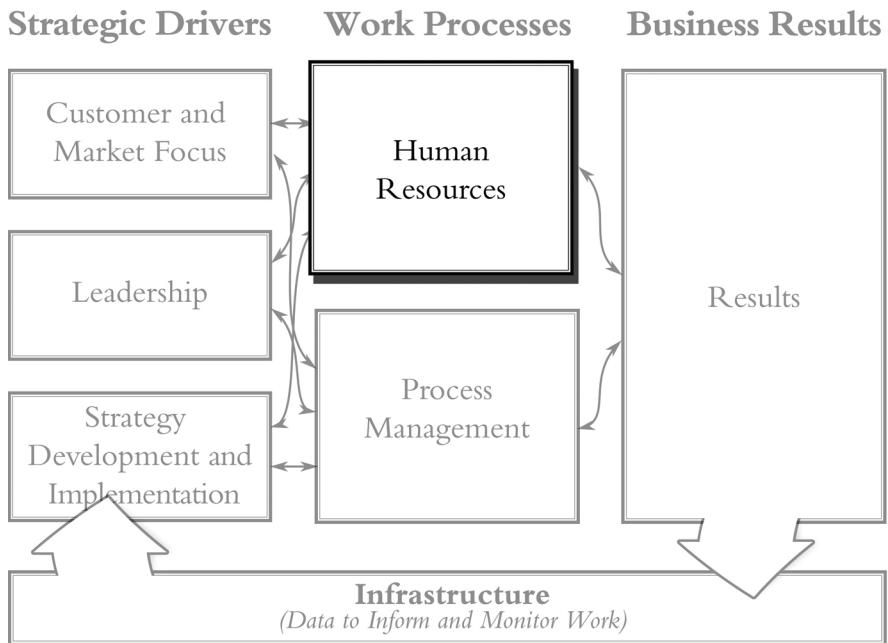
The identification of deliverable, equitable, and sustainable business services will be important to the Network. Initially, it is expected that the available services will be greatest at the state level then become more narrow at the regional level and the least number of services would be found at the national level. However the number of services will grow as the network matures in capacity.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Strategy Development	State Network	Regional Network	National Network
Systematically gathers information from VR staff, business, VR consumers, and partners	Gathers statewide information from local points of contact, business, VR consumers, VR staff, and partners	Business account survey across state lines. Regional points of contact survey. Regional business advisory/alliance group	Surveys national business account staff at multiple levels. Surveys the points of contact. national business advisory/alliance group. Reviews state and regional CQI information to identify needs.
Analyze customer information gleaned to align allocation of resources to implement and maintain program	Statewide	Regionally - leveraging resources	Nationally - nationally to leverage capacity and increase effectiveness
Reports CQI information to businesses, VR consumers, staff and partners	Statewide	Regionally report CQI info to business and partners	Nationally report CQI info to business and partners

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Strategy

Growing and improving the national, regional, and state employment networks requires VR and their partners to listen to the business and VR customers. VR “recognizes that customers are interested in solutions to their problems and looks to unmet needs, realizing that current service offerings may not provide the best response to customer needs.” (Van Hooser, 1993) VR studies and evaluates the information to identify, implement, and evaluate change in the VR-business networks. Innovation in the network is the result of CQI. As a network, we must make a commitment to CQI.

Human Resources



The competency, responsiveness, and ability of VR staff, regardless of VR program staffing patterns, are among the most important factors in the success of the public vocational rehabilitation program. Our human resources are our most valuable asset in accomplishing our goals. VR serves two customers requiring different types of services to achieve organizational results. In order to achieve those results, staff must seek information from each type of customer in order to serve both customers. To maximize effectiveness staff must understand the inter-relationship between the dual customers and have the ability to serve both customers effectively.

VR staff cannot serve the dual customer base as two single separate unrelated customer markets. It is imperative that staff with a primary focus on business understand the inherent value and connections of both consumer and business customers. It is just as imperative that staff with a primary focus on consumers also understand the inherent value and connections of both consumer and business customers.

Hiring practices, orientation, and training impact the effectiveness of the public VR workforce. The foundation of recruiting, hiring, training and retaining staff in the VR system is built at the state agency level. The strength of this foundation supports a strong VR-business network.

Human Resources at the State Level

It is through the efforts of our field-level staff that we are able to directly serve our dual customers, consumers and business. State agencies serve dual customers through a variety of staffing patterns. No matter the staffing pattern, there are fundamental expectations of staff that serve the business customer and the consumer customer.

Expectations of Local VR Business-focused Staff (Internal Local Points of Contact):

- Create relationships with business within their communities for identifying current and future employment opportunities, understanding of business needs, aiding in recruitment and hiring, providing needed services to employers (training, consultations, retention/job save), strategic HR planning, creating job trial locations, training opportunities, etc.
- Serve as the local point of contact and with the designated point of contact comprise the in-state VR-business network
- Provide immediate response and solution-focused customer service to business
- Practice relationship-based marketing from a customer-driven perspective
- Leverage employer resources and information with colleagues throughout the state
- Share, internally, business and consumer needs to improve outcomes
- Understand the consumer as a vital customer in achieving agency goals and outcomes
- Understand the basic consumer service delivery process
- Understand basic differences and similarities between VR's dual customers
- Maintain strong linkage to designated point of contact

Translating these expectations into performance standards and outcomes substantiates VR programs' accountability, thereby leading to internal and external credibility. Established performance expectations for staff serving dual customers should be clear and outcome-focused. Implementing VR agency

and individual staff statewide performance standards allows for program and staff evaluation based on business satisfaction with services and the practice of hiring VR consumers. The performance evaluation system should capture, reinforce and reward employer relationship building activities and outcomes and capture that internal communication is utilized effectively between staff positions. VR program and staff performance standards include quantitative as well as qualitative information about the following:

- Businesses working with VR and receiving on-going services resulting in the statewide business network
- Types and frequency of services provided to businesses
- Delivery of quality services that meet needs of business
- Job orders received from business network and others
- Consumers interviewed to fill job orders
- Consumers hired to fill job orders
- Consumers closed successfully with businesses in the statewide network
- Employees with disabilities assisted with job retention/save
- Memberships in professional business organizations and associations
- Satisfaction rate of businesses receiving services
- Marketing and education services to business

The ability of VR to recruit, match, and train staff with the skills and competency to successfully work with business and with other VR staff and consumers is critical. In order to achieve this, VR needs to:

- Include business training and experiences in position descriptions for designated VR business focused staff
- Create internal VR agency training designed to support business network services and protocols that is available to all VR staff
- Identify and support participation in professional business organizations and associations
- Create VR training and technical assistance for the VR partners to facilitate a common understanding of business practices, programs,

and expectations

- Ensure all VR staff are trained on the agency's deliverable services to business, as well as how to market them

Expectations of Consumer-Focused Staff

In Chapter 3, the *On Your Mark, Get Set, Go* sections discussed the necessary employment information utilized during the process of assisting a consumer in their job exploration, preparation, and employment. Expectations of VR staff focusing on the consumer include:

- Incorporate labor market, employer information, and workplace expectations from initial intake throughout the rehabilitation process
- Increased employer/employment knowledge at the beginning of the process enhances consumer choice when consumers and their counselors jointly identify individual barriers and develop employment goals
- Ensure consumers receive timely and individually tailored employment readiness services based on employment goals
- Understand the employer as a vital customer in achieving agency goals and outcomes
- Understand basic differences and similarities between VR's dual customers
- Share, internally, business and consumer needs to improve outcomes
- Utilize information gained from business in providing enhanced services to consumers
- Include consumers in an accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date talent pool

Human Resources at the Regional level

As previously discussed, the designated point of contact serves as the key regional representative and participates in activities as listed. This point of contact is designated by the state and is a person who has the interpersonal, technical, and programmatic competencies and authority to work on a regional level.

Local in-state staff can contribute to and benefit from the regional network.

Staff may:

- Provide administrative support to the point of contact for regional activities
- Augment regional activities (enlist local staff expertise)
- Participate in regional activities that enhance their effectiveness in building employer relationships
- Utilize the network, through the point of contact, to overcome barriers and enhance employer relationships

Human Resources at the National Level

The National VR-business network will benefit from the combined efforts and expertise of agency staff and national leadership dedicated to business relations. A National VR-business network requires staff dedicated to the functions of running and maintaining the network. It would be difficult to grow a national network without dedicated staff. National staff would be instrumental in facilitating communication, providing guidance, support, and technical assistance as VR focuses on businesses at all levels. They monitor the achievements of the national marketing plan and evaluate customer satisfaction. It is a partnership that links regions and states and business across the country.

National staff dedicated to the VR Business Network would:

- Create communication/information sharing vehicles for VR-business network
- Provide opportunities for networking VR-to-VR and VR-to-business
- Partner with network members to expand corporate relationships
- Market VR as a national employment resource delivery system

The commitment to serve the dual customer is reflected in a state agency's approach to human resource planning, management, and development. The dedication of resources to support a designated point of contact will ensure that the consumers and businesses of a state agency have the ability to access and maximize the efforts of a network at all levels.

Education, Training, and Technical Assistance

The public VR system provides a cadre of resources that can benefit the growth and development of the VR-business network at all levels through pre-service, in-service and the Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education programs. Maximizing and leveraging these resources is significant to the growth of the network.

Pre-service

State VR Agencies across the country depend upon the educational preparation of future staff through the undergraduate and graduate programs specializing in Rehabilitation Counseling and other rehabilitation fields. The education of qualified staff, which includes a focus on serving dual customers, consumers and business, is a vital element of the formal education system needed today and in the future.

Each VR agency should become familiar with the philosophy and specific content of the employment courses offered to students who may eventually become VR staff members. Many agencies serve on academic advisory boards and, as such, have the opportunity to offer input regarding knowledge, skills and abilities required of the public VR system toward serving the dual customer model. The agency's management team has a responsibility to support and encourage their university partners to include and embrace marketing principles and employer relationship building as a significant area of their curricula.

The challenge before us involves agency leadership, university educators and national professional associations to communicate and reach consensus as to what steps need to be addressed in the expansion and development of courses related to building employer partnerships. A broad inclusion of educators and practitioners widens the scope and ability to have a national cohesive impact on strengthening the dual customer focus in the educational arena.

In-Service Training

Each state agency has its own internal training staff and/or department, responsible for building, reinforcing, and updating staff expertise with specific goals and objectives enumerated through a Rehabilitation Services Administration In-Service Training Grant. General educational development, knowledge acquisition, and skill building are all necessary components of the internal training unit. Ensuring that training efforts are focused to enhance skills and knowledge to serve the dual customer are important.

In-service offerings may be enhanced by accessing the shared expertise within the VR-Business Network. Prior IRI publications focusing on mar-

keting, employer development and other related issues have served as excellent resources that can be integrated into internal training efforts for current and future staff.

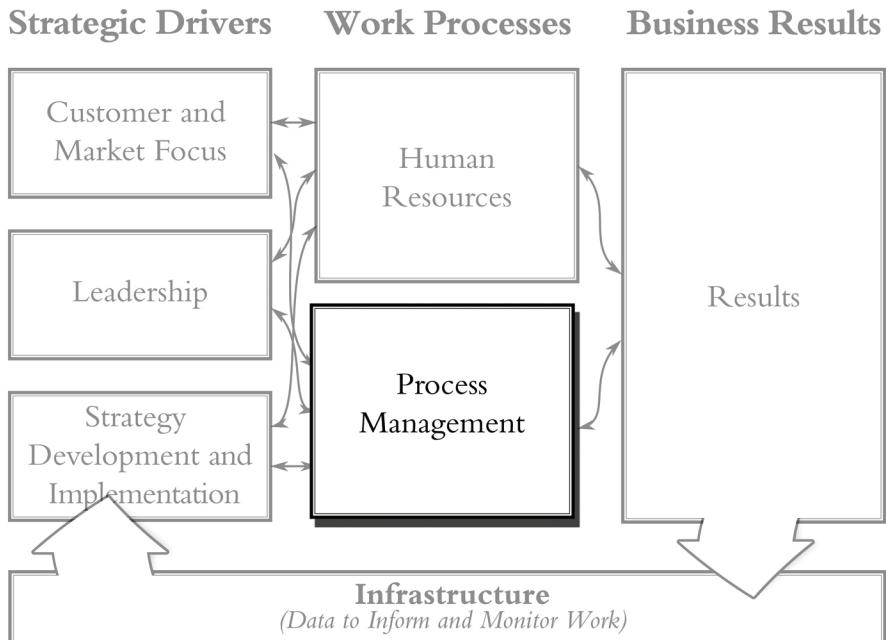
Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Programs (RRCEPs)

Since 1974, the national network of RRCEPs has been a key resource to the State-Federal Rehabilitation Program. The RRCEPs are in a unique position to assist state agencies (as well as teams of agencies) at all three levels as the growth of the VR-business network expands. Across the country, RRCEPs have increasingly become more involved in serving their specific state agencies and regional networks. (For an example of how one regional-network operates successfully, see Appendix C “The Region IV Story”.)

Some examples of RRCEP involvement that have proved effective are:

- Assist in the development of strategic employer business plans
- Provide vehicles for communication among partners (i.e., teleconferences, distribution lists via e-mail, etc.)
- Convene meetings and compile agendas from meeting participants
- Provide facilitation at meetings
- Work collaboratively with their agency partners
- Gather and disseminate employer/business information relevant to VR program partnership initiatives
- Development and management of Web sites
- Assist with other on-line communication tools
- Support regional and national employment conferences
- Provide expertise through consultations and training and to the regional team

Process Management



Well-designed internal and external processes and agreed upon communication strategies are vital components to the success of a national VR-business network. Successful implementation of processes and quality assurance at the state, regional and national level will help to ensure that both business and consumers receive the highest level of products and services. The foundational principles of trust, deliverability, consistency, responsiveness, and quality should be infused into all internal and external processes.

On a local, state, regional, and national level, VR agencies need to develop a system of sharing employment related information: job ready applicant pools, names of employer accounts that can be used for testimonials in other areas, resource materials as described previously, technology, and other job accommodation solutions. Leadership at the state, regional, and national level to include VR directors, the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is a critical component. (Van Hooser, 1993, p. 47)

Processes at the State Level

Effectively designed and managed internal agency processes are essential to serve business and consumers successfully with a maximum utilization of resources. Systems must be in place that allow for and support communication, information exchange and customer service. Internal processes should be “user friendly” for internal and external customers and supported by well designed and appropriate technological systems using effective integrated software. Using information gleaned from both internal and external customers, agencies can continually assess, modify and improve processes to meet outcomes and increase effectiveness.

Special emphasis and attention should be paid to these internal processes that will increase the effectiveness of serving both business and consumers:

- A consumer service delivery process with a correlating system that captures consumer focused information in a case management system.
 - Consumer information is gathered to enhance service choices to reach individual goals
 - Individual needs
 - Vocational or career goals
 - Abilities
 - Labor market demands and skills required by employers
 - Existing barriers
 - Personal support systems
 - Process involves informed choice
- A business service delivery process (business accounts) with a correlating system that captures statewide business customer information.
 - Business information is gathered to enhance service choices to reach business objectives
 - Needs – present and projected
 - Hiring patterns
 - Disability retention/management

- Other needs such as customer service or emergency evacuation planning
- Company Demographics and Profiles
 - Hiring patterns
 - Application procedures
 - Background check requirements
 - Staffing patterns, types of jobs (descriptions/requirements), job vacancies
 - Working environment/climate/organizational culture
 - Contact information
 - Previous experience with hiring people with disabilities
 - Tag potential leverage capacity (i.e., like industry, branch locations, statewide/regional/national presence)
- An internal communications process that promotes and expects timely flow of information about employer needs/opportunities and consumer needs/desires between *all* VR staff. The consumer and business service delivery processes merge. Shared and integrated information is used to influence:
 - Consumer preparation for work
 - Business services
 - Internal processes to address the needs of both business and consumers
 - Ability to deliver what is promised
 - Dedication of resources both staff and funding
 - A statewide process designed to identify employment ready (qualified, ready to work) consumers in a timely manner in a talent pool system. This system is not a listing of job openings, but a comprehensive, up-to-date listing of consumers seeking employment that augments the consumer and business delivery systems.

- A performance management process that captures, reinforces and rewards:
 - Established performance expectations for serving dual customers that are clear and outcome-focused
 - Employer relationship building activities and outcomes
 - Effective internal communication of information to improve outcomes and processes between agency staff/positions
- Internal processes to support the point of contact

Processes at the Regional Level

The regional VR-business network will develop communication vehicles and processes to enable them to build a viable team that works together and responds rapidly and with consistency to each other and to business. Most regional VR-business networks will find themselves conducting business in a relatively virtual environment in a majority of circumstances. Creating a team structure that can operate effectively with team members separated by distance will be paramount to becoming effective. Processes that emerge to facilitate the regional network will be enhanced when:

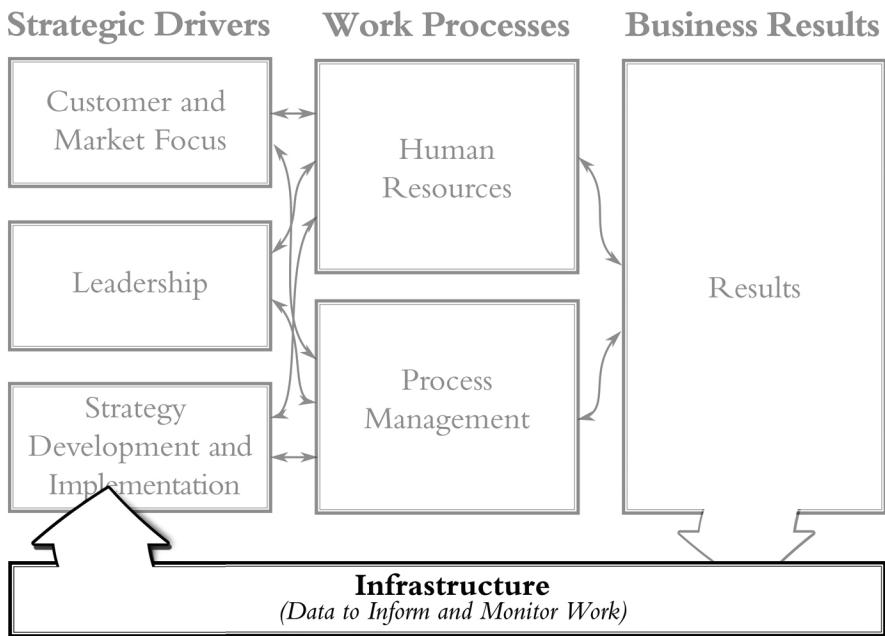
- Designated points of contact work as a team, adhering to agreed upon protocols for doing business with business
- Regional team members determine the most effective communication vehicles for their team
- Regional team members effectively share information
- The process contributes to a consistent and effective interaction with business
- Regional team establishes priorities
- Communication to regional executive leadership on outcomes, activities, successes and needs takes place on a regular basis (such as regional meetings of state directors, CSAVR regional meetings)
- The points of contact keep their individual state leadership apprised of activities and outcomes of the regional network and verify direction

Processes at the National Level

The processes needed at this national level must be able to accommodate and include a membership of the full VR public program. Processes to increase effectiveness would include:

- Clear expectations and protocols for the VR-business network
- For communication between VR to VR, VR to business, or business to VR
- For brand identity and consistency in marketing the VR message to business
- Consistency in expectations and service delivery across states and regions
- Quality assurance in service delivery to business
- Communication mechanisms that are accessible, viable, and usable
- Access to current contacts and network related information
- Information storage and retrieval
- Gathering and sharing the resources and best practices of the VR system

Infrastructure



A strong infrastructure and adequate resource allocation are not only necessary but vital to the success of the public VR program in serving the dual customer. VR to VR relationships and VR to business relationships rely on a well-structured and supportive infrastructure that sustains the gathering, retrieval and storage of needed information/data. Resource allocation is complex in this time of strained resources, and priorities must be established. Allocating resources to serve business needs is good business in a dual customer driven organization.

The creation and maintenance of user-friendly systems to gather, disseminate and integrate dual customer information at the state, regional, and national level requires substantial resources. Technology has become the key-stone in agency infrastructure. Technology should be shaped and configured to support the underlying work processes (discussed previously in the chapter) that focus on case management systems, account systems, marketing, reporting, monitoring and tracking.

Infrastructure at the State Level

Resource allocation:

- Recruit, retain and grow highly trained and informed VR staff in the realm of both the consumer customer and the business customer

- Provide time and dollars to support activities of point of contact
- Provide memberships in appropriate business/employer/trade organizations, i.e., Chambers, local business groups, Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) and encourage participation
- Provide business-appropriate marketing materials, designed with input from business customers
- Provide appropriate tools to conduct business in mobile environment (cell phones, laptops, etc.)
- Provide and utilize technology that enables staff to access, exchange and analyze information to serve the dual customer. Examples:
 - State VR Web site, with information focused to serve needs of both
 - Employer Account System/Database
 - Consumer Case Management System/Database
 - Job Bank and Comprehensive Applicant Pool
 - Reporting and tracking

Infrastructure at the Regional Level

Resource Allocation

- Support of the designated point of contact
 - Allocation of time and effort
 - Travel costs to attend regional functions/meetings
- Support of other staff
 - Allocation of time and effort to utilize expertise
 - Travel costs for attending appropriate functions/meetings (such as regional employment conference)
- Material resources such as training modules and marketing materials
- Technology support for the regional network

- Design and utilize technology for information sharing VR to VR
 - Types of information
 - Employer account profiles to include needs and services rendered
 - Effective practices
 - Training
- Regional accountability
 - Track, analyze and report outcomes of regional leveraging
 - Track progress on regional marketing plan
- Design and utilize technology for information sharing VR to business
 - Businesses are able to locate points of contact within a regional network
 - Information that is relevant to needs of business
 - Testimonials of why it's good business to do business with VR
- Utilize variety of technology related sources to accomplish goals such as: Web site, chat rooms, listserves, teleconferencing and Web meetings

Infrastructure at the National Level

Resource allocation

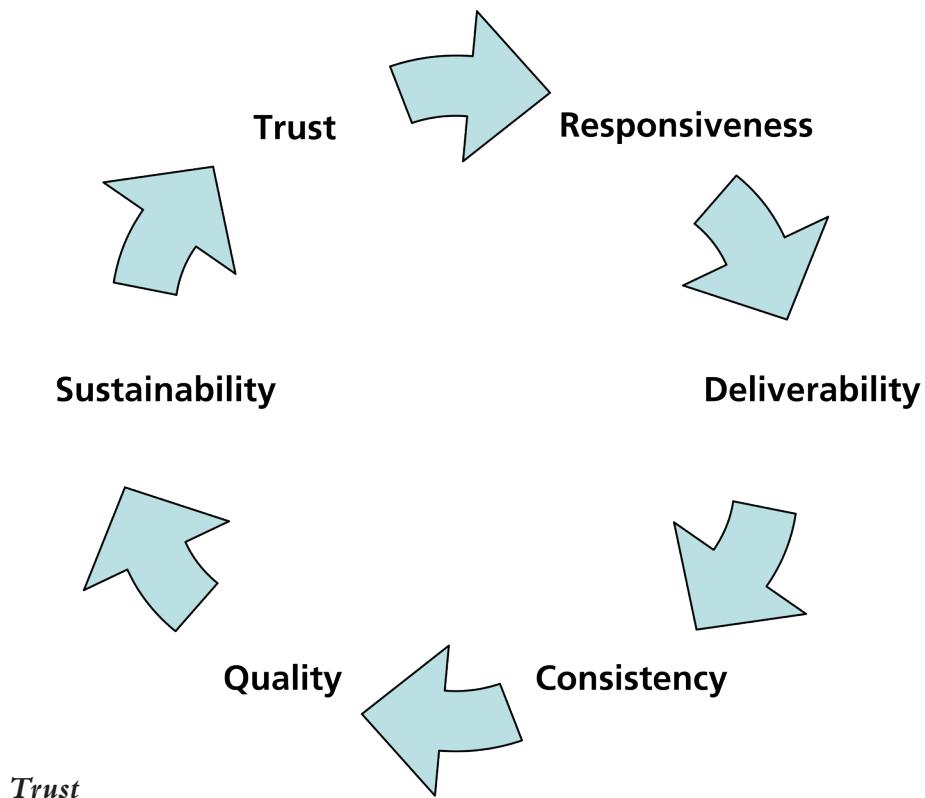
- Financial support of participation of point of contact/leadership/others in national activities
- Time/effort support of participation of point of contact/leadership/others in national activities
- Technology support for the national network
 - Communication tools and systems to promote national networking such as:

- Web site utilizing the Share-Point software system
- Teleconferencing and/or Web meeting systems and support
- List serves
- Chat rooms or discussion formats
- Design and utilize technology for sharing information VR to VR, VR to business and business to VR
- Design and maintain a system to capture national achievements and outcomes
- Design retrieval of information for data analysis for continuous improvement

Protocols for VR-Business Networks

Through a professional network code of conduct, we can display the professional courtesies that allow the best work of the network to yield the most positive results. Historically, VR points of contact have been reluctant to share detailed business information. The points of contact are concerned that the relationships they have nurtured and built with business will not be respected. They are fearful that colleagues and partners will jump over them and directly contact businesses and that they may even make inappropriate referrals of job candidates. Protocols or professional courtesies will provide a set of practices that will respect the states' point of contact relationships with businesses and improve communication and collaboration in a multi-level VR-business network. Some VR agencies have developed strategic plans to address these issues, creating a win-win for all.

Foundational Principles and Protocols



- Respect the point of contact (Note: this use of the term “point of contact” is general in that it can refer to an individual at the local, state, regional or national level)
- The point of contact has an established relationship with business
- The point of contact assesses needs and with the business customer determines that appropriate services are delivered or can be designed to meet the business need
- The point of contact maintains customer service for that business account
- Contact the point of contact to access a business
- Contact designated state POC to interact with businesses or VR staff in the state

- Give credit where credit is due and when using other's work as a resource
- Share appropriate information openly and willingly with trusted colleagues and partners

Responsiveness

- Respond in a timely* manner to business, VR staff and consumers
- Respond in a timely* manner in point of contact to point of contact inquiries
- Respect the sense of urgency in responding to requests and address concerns immediately

Deliverability

- Deliver on what you promise to business, VR staff and consumers and the point of contact
- Accurately define services for customers to prevent misrepresentation of capability

Consistency

- Maintain the same level of follow-up and deliverability with all customers.
- Understand the services you offer to ensure consistency and quality

Quality

- Ensure services are provided that meet or exceed the expressed needs and standards of the customer

Sustainability

- Ensure that staff are prepared to meet the ever changing needs of the dual customer
- Ensure that as designated points of contact change, there is a smooth and seamless transition
- Ensure that the framework to building effective networks is kept strong and vibrant

*What is timely? Timely is defined by the customer, not you, in

a customer driven system. When does the customer need you to get back to them—5 minutes or 2 business days? For consistency in the national, regional, and state networks, it is suggested that 2 business days for a response is absolutely the maximum allowable.

Foundational Network Principles Already Working in VR Agencies

Many VR agencies throughout the country have already applied a variety of the “best practices,” foundational principles and critical components described in this chapter. Following is but a brief overview of some of the agencies that have successfully partnered with businesses in a manner that helps to build the strong foundation for an in-state, regional or national network between VR and business.

North Dakota VR Marketing Materials: This agency has implemented a focused marketing campaign to its business customers and supported that campaign with a series of professional marketing tools. Their Web page dedicated to the business customer, their brochures that feature their services to business, and other supporting materials can be viewed by visiting the RSA Web site where this initiative is featured under best practices.

Massachusetts VR OJE-OJT Program: Through customized marketing to employers, along with quality matching of VR consumer needs to those of business, “Mass VR” has successfully built an on-the-job evaluation (OJE) program, along with an on-the-job training (OJT) program that creates a win-win scenario for all three members of its employment network: consumers, business and VR. By focusing on occupational skills evaluation and/or training at the job site, VR partners work with targeted business partners on behalf of VR consumers to develop new skills or enhance existing skills of that consumer, creating the opportunity for enhanced career opportunities and successful employment outcomes. These job-site services are brokered by the Mass VR representative in a customized agreement with the business which positively impacts all three partners.

Hyatt Hotel Initiative: In a unique and highly effective 3-way partnership between Florida VR, a community rehabilitation partner (CRP), and the Hyatt Hotel, an extremely effective training initiative is generating successful employment opportunities for VR consumers. A 2-week “hands-on” training program is conducted for pre-screened VR consumers by the CRP on-site at the Hyatt Hotel. Graduating students are then offered employment with the hotel. The program has been so successful in Florida that it is being considered for replication in other VR agencies as a direct result of national

network activities via a co-hosted meeting for VR agencies and Hyatt Hotel representatives in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C.

REI, Inc. Partnership with VR in Washington and California: Recreational Equipment, Inc. is a renowned supplier of outdoor gear and clothing with 82 retail stores throughout the U.S. REI is now partnering with both Washington State VR and California VR, tapping into several of the customized business services that these agencies have to offer. The most pressing REI need addressed by these VR agencies has been customized training for selected REI staff and HR managers on mental health issues in the workplace, along with extensive technical assistance focused on job-site accommodations. This is yet another example of the VR-business network in action as the REI, Inc.-VR partnership was replicated from Washington VR to California VR as a direct response to the need of this multi-state business partner.

Summary

The national VR-business network is both a complex and simple structure. The network operates on multiple levels: state, regional and national. It is a network based on relationships: VR to VR and VR to business. It is a network based on the interdependent roles of the dual customer. Business, Consumers, and VR are intertwined in a symbiotic relationship where VR can provide the connection for both customers to benefit. The ability to build relationships internally within the public VR system and the ability to build relationships with business and industry in the employer marketplace on a state, regional, and national level will allow the network to expand and grow yielding many benefits. Building these relationships based on the foundational principles of trust, deliverability, consistency, responsiveness and quality will provide a strong basis for continued growth and development with each other and with business.

The deliverability, sustainability and effectiveness of the network lies in the foundational abilities of the individual state agencies. Each VR agency has a responsibility to ensure that every one of the components necessary to sustain and propel a dual customer driven network are in place and operational. The vital internal components outlined in this chapter—leadership; strategy development and implementation; human resources; process management and infrastructure—all work together for maximum results and outcomes for *both* customers of the public VR program.

Self-Study Questions

1. The importance of building and aligning the internal organizational components of leadership, strategy development, human resources, process management and infrastructure at all levels of the VR-business network are:
 - a) Maximizing the results of the VR-business network
 - b) Serving dual customers effectively
 - c) Leveraging resources
 - d) Achievement of goals
 - e) All of the above
2. (T/F) The designated point of contact has two primary functions (1) work internally with their state agency to foster a coordinated state network and (2) to liaison with points of contact regionally and nationally to forge a strong VR-business network to leverage resources and maximize results.
3. The development of strategies to tactically design and manage services to enhance the dual customer focus and the growth of the VR-business network involve focusing on such areas as:
 - a) Maintaining the status quo
 - b) Marketing
 - c) Appropriate and relevant business services to both customers
 - d) Continuous quality improvement
 - e) All of the above except a
4. (T/F) The competency, responsiveness and ability of VR staff are among the most important factors of the public vocational rehabilitation program's ability to grow the VR-business network.
5. (T/F) Well-designed processes at all levels of the VR-business network will help to ensure that both businesses and consumers receive the highest level of products and services.
6. Processes that will increase the effectiveness of the VR-business network as it expands regionally and nationally will include:
 - a) Communication protocols and methods
 - b) Up-to-date contact information and network related information

- c) Information storage and retrieval
 - d) Communication mechanisms that are accessible to all
 - e) All of the above
7. An effective infrastructure should be designed to support the work processes and the gathering, storage and retrieval of information to ensure the success of the VR program to include:
- a) Allocating appropriate financial resources
 - b) Prioritizing need on first come first served
 - c) Design infrastructure to enhance storage and utilization of information
 - d) Support to designated points of contact
 - e) All of the above except b
8. Responsiveness, one of the foundational principles, speaks to the timeliness of response to customers whether the customer is another VR staff member, a business, or a consumer. Who determines whether the response is timely or not?
- a) The person responding
 - b) The person receiving the response
9. (T/F) VR can serve its dual customer base as two single unrelated customer markets and build an effective VR-business network.
10. Which of the following are strategies to enhance the development of effective business services at all levels of the VR Business Network:
- a) Develop services in a brainstorming activity at an agency retreat
 - b) Deliver services based on personality style of leader
 - c) Only have internal staff evaluate quality of services
 - d) Support business accounts when convenient
 - e) None of the above

Chapter Five:

Building Blocks of a Mature System: Progression Steps For VR as “One Company”

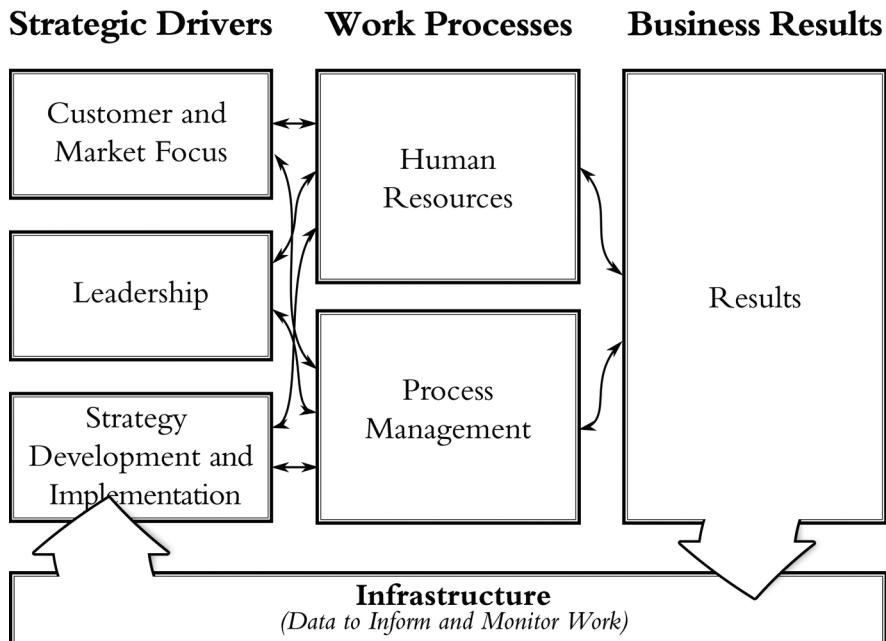
Introduction

One of the first questions many state VR agencies will ask is, “How do I begin the process of building capacity to support the establishment of this new employer network initiative?” This section describes an array of progression steps to help VR agencies define the infrastructure needed to develop and implement VR-Business partnerships that are fully integrated with their organizational needs. While there are many different VR agencies nationwide, each with its own unique circumstances, the overarching goal is to develop a “one company” model that will provide a level of consistency across in-state, regional and national networks. The question for each agency to ask is not only “How do we participate in the network?” but also “How do we prepare our own agency to become an active and engaged franchise of the new one company?”

This document defines six critical components of the development and implementation of VR-VR and VR-Business partnerships. The integration and alignment of these six components with VR organizational objectives leads to optimized VR results on a state, regional and national basis. VR customers of all kinds articulate a set of expectations which guide a sustainable results-oriented set of partnerships. These core Foundational Principles—Trust, Responsiveness, Deliverability, Consistency, Quality and Sustainability—

-become the overarching set of principles upon which partnership components are based.

The Six Critical Components of the VR-Business Network

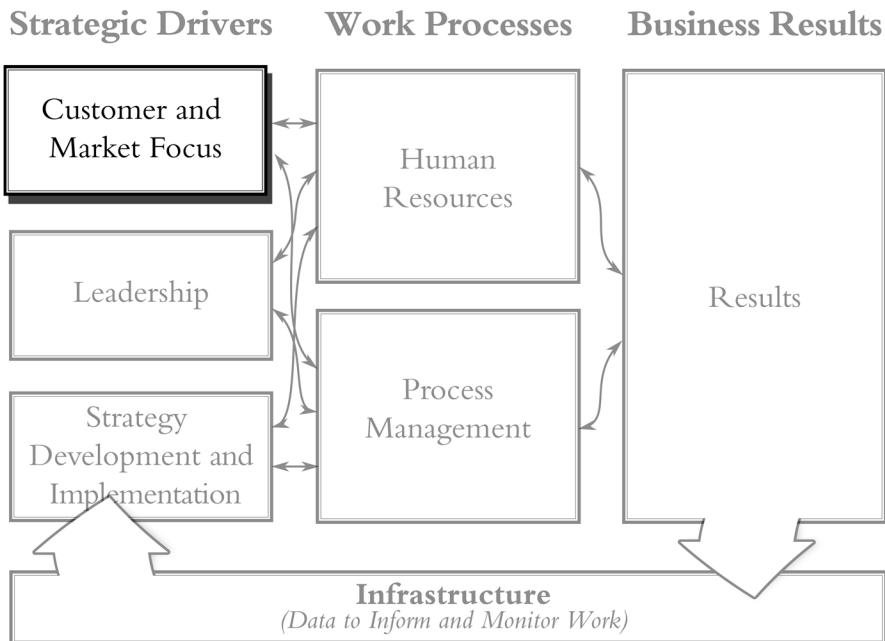


While the six Critical Components (Customer and Market Focus, Leadership, Strategy Development and Implementation, Infrastructure, Human Resources and Process Management) align with the core components of the Baldrige National Quality Program 2006 Criteria for Performance Excellence, six Foundational Principles (defined in Chapter 4) represent the philosophical basis of the implementation of the Network. Vermont Vocational Rehabilitation and South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation have both embraced the Performance Criteria as the framework to integrate and align these components. More detail about their experience can be found in Appendix D.

What follows are some brief descriptions of the six critical components and a sample “Maturity Scale” a VR agency might consider. This chapter also includes a self-study set of questions to help agencies determine how mature their processes are in each component area. The sample maturity scale helps an agency determine what their individually defined path looks like as they develop a fully operational set of VR-Business partnerships that are fully integrated with organizational needs and goals.

Let's take a look at each component.

Customer Focus



Customers are the final judges of how well the organization did its job, and what they say counts. It is their perception of the service and the product that will determine whether they remain loyal or constantly seek better providers... Value and satisfaction may be influenced by many factors . . . (and) these include your organization's relationships with customers, which help to build trust, confidence, and loyalty.

Mark L. Blazey
Insights to Performance Excellence 2004
American Society for Quality, Quality Press, Milwaukee 2004, p30, 31.

Central to the development of effective networks and partnerships is the differentiated understanding of the dual customers. The VR program exhibits a mature process for acquiring knowledge regarding the consumer customer. The Individualized Plan for Employment articulates this knowledge and provides a vehicle for focusing on VR's consumer customer knowledge.

The shift to become a demand-driven workforce development system guides VR to gain an equally intimate knowledge of the business customer. VR-Business partnerships result from effective relationship building that leads to a mutual customer-supplier relationship.

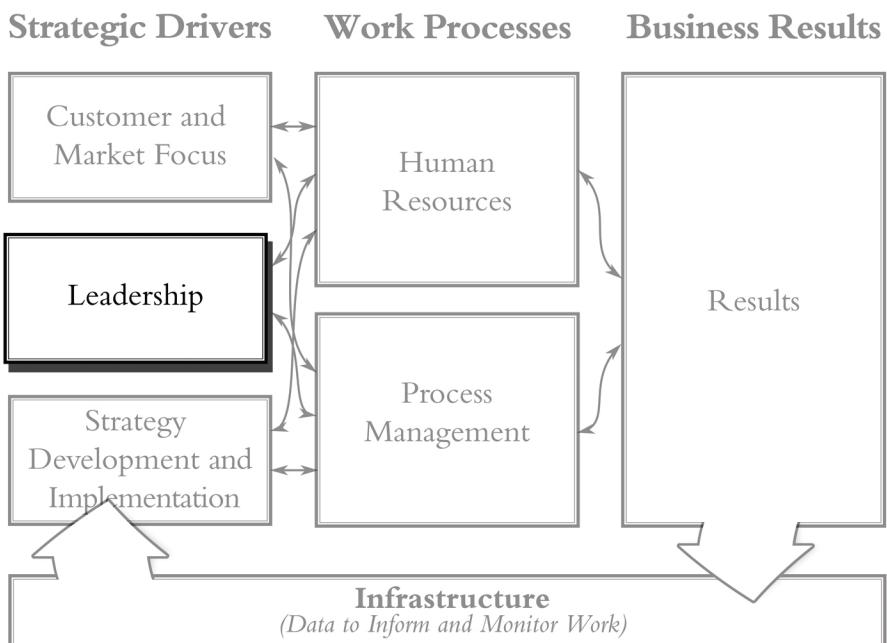
A reflection of an agency's maturity in its implementation and use of dual customer information will be reflected in the manner in which such infor-

mation is incorporated into all levels of agency practices. The more integrated and coordinated the various customer services are, the more effective overall performance becomes. In VR terms, this means the better aligned services are between the business customer and the consumer customer, the more likely successful employment outcomes will increase.

Initiated	Completed	Customer Focus
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agency does not understand or accept the concept of dual customer
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Agency is in the beginning stage of acquiring business customer knowledge to identify their needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Dedicated staff time to marketing with business. » Business Advisory Committees » Business Customer Surveys » Business Customer Focus Groups
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Agency is in the beginning stages of building a systematic approach to developing business relationships.
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Agency has begun to initiate a mechanism to assess business customer satisfaction.
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Agency is beginning to use information from existing business relationships to evaluate and improve business services.
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Acquired employer customer knowledge has been fully incorporated into the VR culture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Informed consumer choice » Strategic planning » Measurable outcomes
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Agency is in the beginning stages of leveraging business partnerships statewide based upon customer knowledge.
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Agency is in the beginning stages of applying the business customer knowledge and relationships to their participation in regional and national VR-business networks.

Initiated	Completed	Customer Focus
		9. Agency has fully implemented and integrated their participation in state, regional and national VR-business networks.
		10. The agency has a fact based systematic process in place to evaluate and improve the processes related to these networks to ensure alignment and integration with their overall organizational goals.

Leadership



A key role of the effective senior leader is to focus the organization on satisfying customers through an effective leadership system. Leaders must champion change. They must role-model the tools of consensus building and decision making as the organization focuses on its vision, mission and strategic direction to keep customers loyal.

Mark L. Blazey
Insights to Performance Excellence 2004, p 51

Senior Leadership establishes, reinforces and communicates the founda-

tional principles of VR-Business partnerships throughout the organization. They include a focus on creating and balancing value for the dual customer. They create an environment that encourages continuous improvement and facilitates all levels of management and staff investment in these principles.

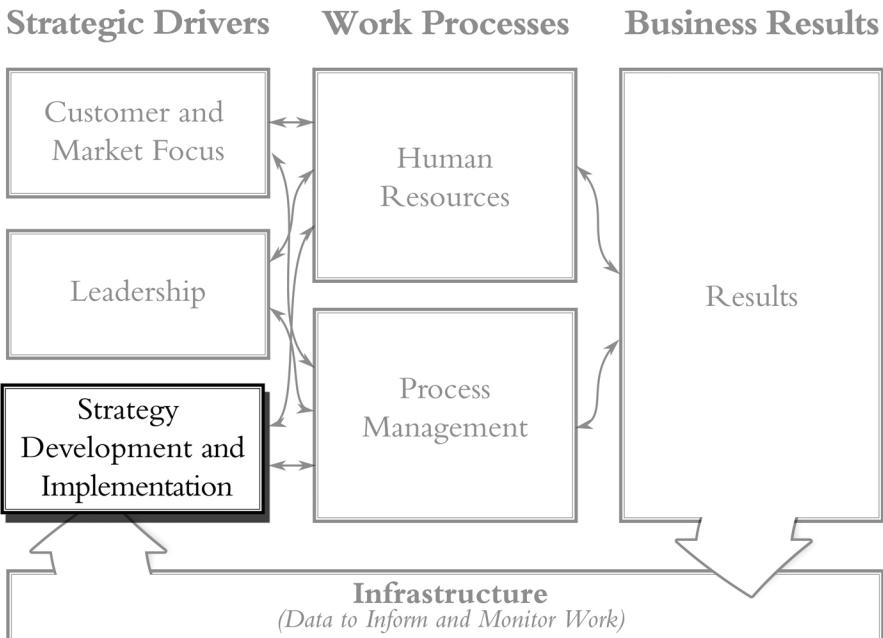
Leadership endorses and provides the resources to support the staffing and infrastructure functions to develop and sustain these partnerships. Leadership understands that it takes time and effort to establish business relationships, and they allocate sufficient resources to the work. They assure that an array of business services are systematically available to meet the business customer and that the agency works continuously to balance the needs of consumers with the expectations of the business customer.

Senior Leaders coordinate with peer VR state, regional and national leaders to continually develop and refine VR-Business partnerships which lead to improved organizational results. Senior Leaders support the designated points of contact (POC) through increased resources, time and administrative support.

Initiated	Completed	Leadership
		1. The foundation principles that guide the agency and its senior leaders regarding VR-to-VR and VR-to-Business partnerships are not clearly understood within the agency
		2. Senior leaders are in the beginning stages of establishing and implementing systems to support the VR-to-VR and VR-to-Business networks
		3. The foundational principles that guide the agency and its senior leaders are understood at all levels of management and throughout the agency
		4. Senior leaders provide sufficient resources to implement VR to VR and VR to business networks » In-state » Regionally » Nationally
		5. Senior leaders are involved in CEO to CEO relationship building in the network

Initiated	Completed	Leadership
		<p>6. Senior leaders endorse and provide resources to support the POC's role</p>
		<p>7. Senior leaders coordinate network activities with state peer VR leaders (in states where two public VR agencies reside)</p>
		<p>8. Senior leaders have fully integrated effective systematic processes to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Set and deploy foundational principles and long term direction and performance expectations related the network(s)» Include a focus on creating and balancing value for the dual customer in their performance expectations» Communicate foundational principles, VR partnerships expectations throughout the leadership system to all employees and to key suppliers and partners» Leadership creates an environment to sustain continuous improvement in state, regional and national networks.
		<p>9. Senior leaders utilize key performance measures for state, regional, national networks, using the findings to ensure alignment with overall organizational needs.</p>

Strategy Development and Implementation



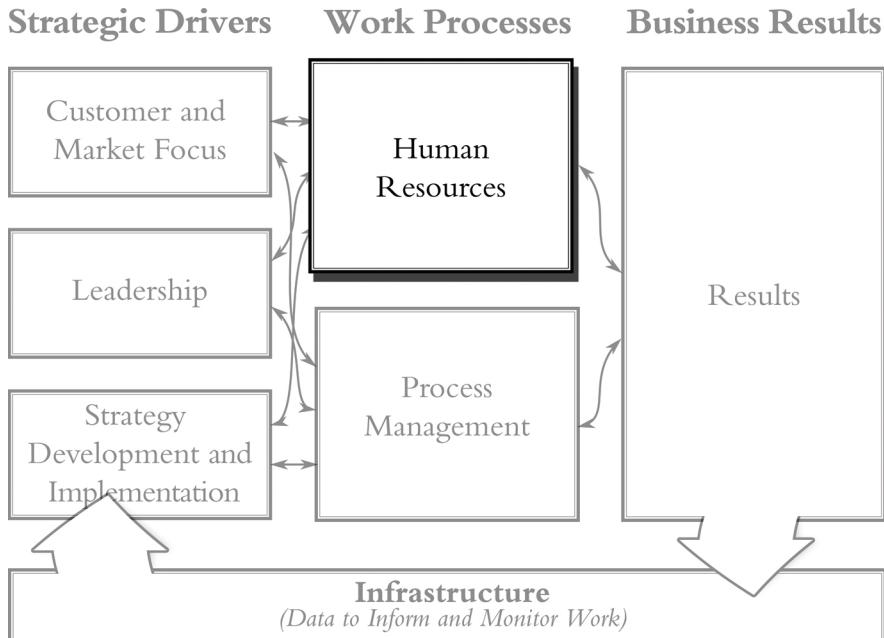
Strategic planning is most effective when it considers approaches to understanding key customer requirements of the consumer and business customers, identifies resources needed to satisfy those customer needs, and translates those strategies systematically into action. Both the development and implementation of strategies related to the VR-Business partnerships lead to positive results when aligned and integrated with overall organizational strategies and goals.

Business asks us as suppliers of workforce development services to provide coordinated strategies for identifying and meeting their business needs. The dynamic business environment lends itself to an agile set of marketing approaches. Any strategic planning that occurs needs to be based upon a continuous improvement process to assure that VR-Partnership services are aligned with changing business needs.

Initiated	Completed	Strategy Development and Implementation
		<i>Businesses Services</i>
		1. Business services have not been identified. Business-focused services are not available. There are no business services.
		2. Business services in some parts of the state.
		3. Business services are available statewide.

Initiated	Completed	Strategy Development and Implementation
		<p>4. VR Business services are aligned and coordinated across state lines.</p>
		<p>5. Business services are coordinated, consistent and of the highest quality and meet the needs of the businesses at the state, regional and national levels.</p>
		<i>Marketing</i>
		<p>1. No marketing strategy in place.</p>
		<p>2. Marketing doesn't portray VR as resource with expertise for business, just a source for candidates.</p>
		<p>3. Marketing plan begins to highlight various business services available (other than qualified candidates).</p>
		<p>4. Business views and uses VR as experts in disability employment issues.</p>
		<i>Continuous Quality Improvement</i>
		<p>1. There is no mechanism for continuous quality improvement.</p>
		<p>2. Desire for information gathering but no resources allocated.</p>
		<p>3. Resources are allocated and begin to obtain feedback from consumers.</p>
		<p>4. Agency includes business customers in feedback loops.</p>
		<p>5. Change in the organization is driven by feedback from all customers. Multiple feedback loops and ability to identify and implement changes.</p>

Human Resources



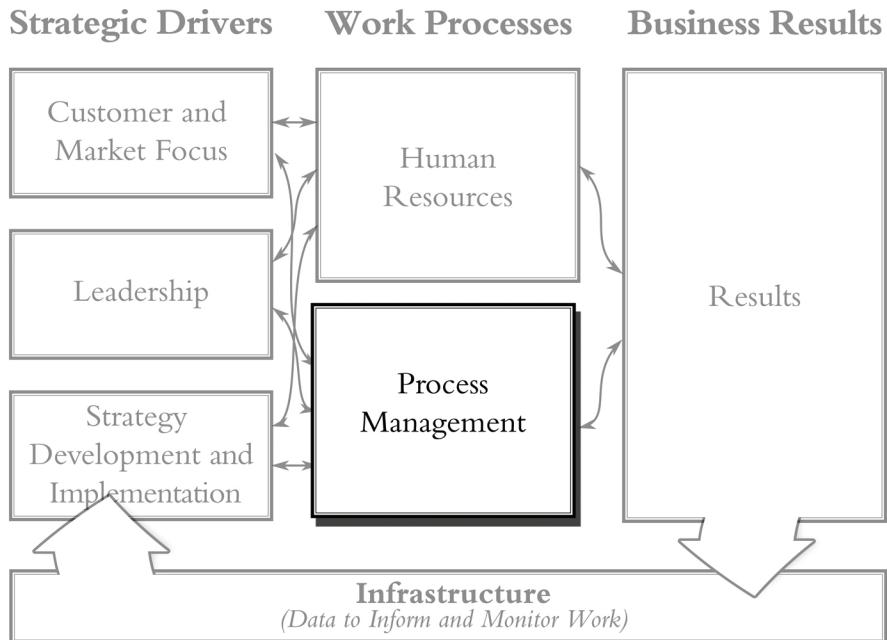
To fully support the implementation of strategies to meet the needs of the business and consumer customers, the agency operationalizes the deployment of business service staff and business partnership points of contact. Work systems are developed and implemented that enable business services staff to maximize their performance. When the work systems related to the business services staff are integrated and aligned with overall organizational goals, all agency staff understand and respect business services as a value added component of the VR system.

A mature Human Resource system routinely identifies and provides for training and continuous improvement activities of business services staff.

Initiated	Completed	Human Resources (Staffing and Learning)
		I. The agency does not have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. a primary POC for in-state, regional or national networks. b. a “local” POC staff/system with a primary responsibility of supporting VR-business relations. c. a mechanism to share information and train staff on VR-business relationships.
		2. The agency has:

Initiated	Completed	Human Resources (Staffing and Learning)
		a. Identified a POC for networks
		b. Marginal support for POC system
		c. In-service training opportunities on VR-business partnerships is an afterthought and offered infrequently.
		3. The agency has fully operationalized and incorporated into its culture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Maximum utilization of a primary POC for all VR-business networks. b. Local POCs for VR-business partners. c. Comprehensive staff development to enhance effective business partners. d. Effective communication systems to support exchange of business relations information among all staff. e. The point of contact and business philosophy is infused at all levels of staff. f. Respect by all agency staff for POC system/role as a VALUE ADDED component of the VR system.
		4. The agency has a fully deployed employee performance management system that supports high performance work and a dual customer focus.
		5. There is a systematic evaluation and improvement process that reflects organizational learning and integration of refinements to better meet organizational needs.

Processes



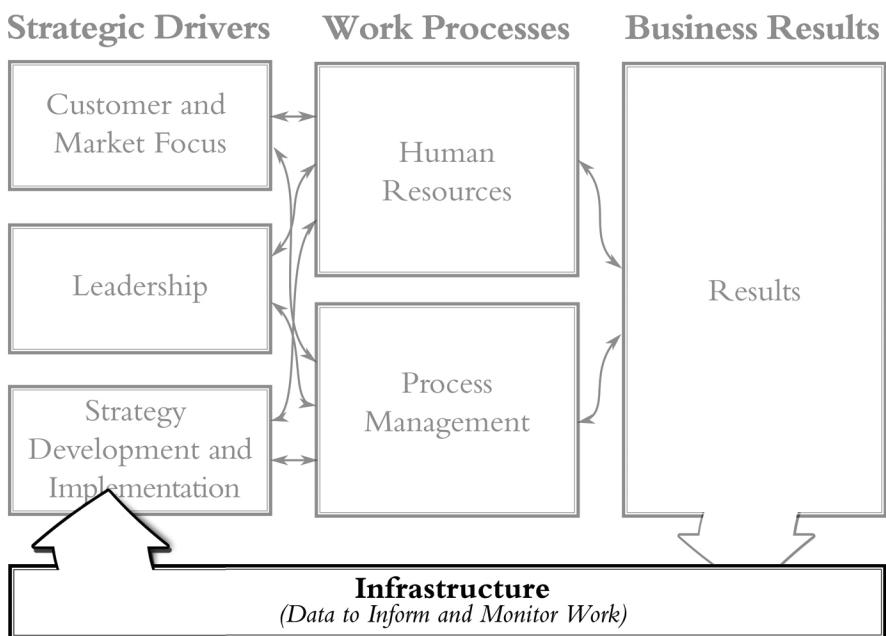
The success of an agency or an initiative is directly linked to its ability to define and implement processes that create value for their customers. The Frameworks Chapter suggests a set of elements to be considered during the design process. The challenge is to implement a consistent process that efficiently and effectively results in value-added services to our customers.

Business processes change at an ever increasing rate, and VR processes to meet business needs need to change accordingly. By not evaluating, improving and refining processes, agencies run the risk of not meeting business customer needs. This could lead to reduced employment success, for example, of consumer customers, leading to their re-engaging with VR. The re-work caused by these inefficiencies is particularly painful during these times of diminished resources.

Initiated	Completed	Processes
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The processes implemented in the agency do not reflect the voices of dual customers.
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The agency is beginning to establish processes to gather information from and about the business customer.

Initiated	Completed	Processes
		3. The agency employs processes that utilize business information to further dual customers' goals.
		4. There are processes that integrate consumer and business customer info, including those that address: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Consumer job readiness b. Labor market information and trends of business development c. Business culture d. Business Services
		e. Communication within state, regional and national networks
		5. There is a process that shares consumer knowledge with business and business knowledge with consumers.
		6. Continually evaluate and improve processes in order to achieve ever greater results.

Infrastructure (IT and Resources)



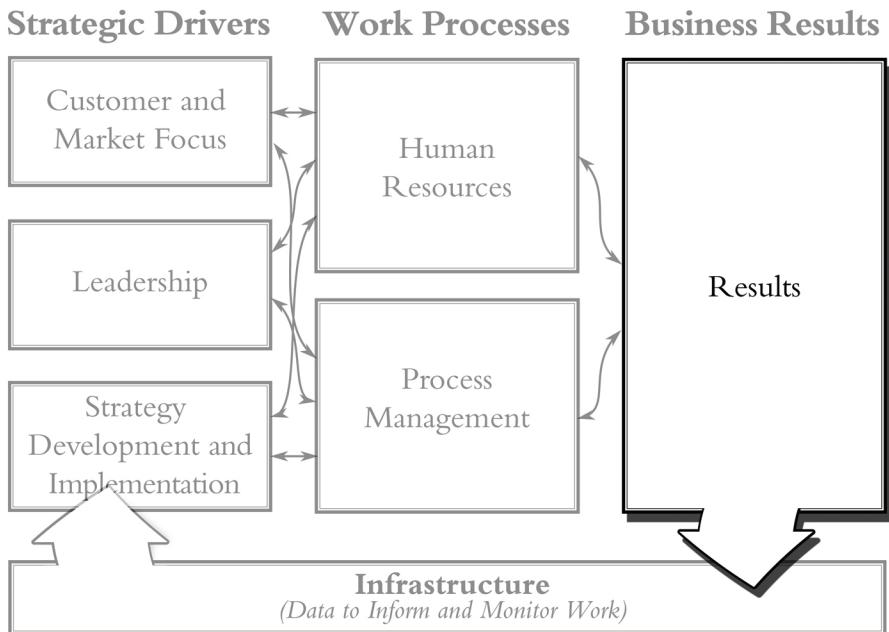
We live in an age where it is easy to become overwhelmed with information. Our challenge is to develop a process for strategically collecting the information needed to meet the needs of our dual customers. Agencies benefit from developing the capacity to effectively manage this information.

Any data systems may fall into disuse if they are not current, efficiently accessible to all employees who need them, reliable, and secure. The state, regional, and national nature of the VR-business network promotes the establishment of information systems that are accessible across agencies (including between VR and its community provider partners).

The network's challenge is to establish and refine an infrastructure that provides benefit to both the consumer and business customer.

Initiated	Completed	Infrastructure (IT and Resources)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are no resources or IT systems in place to support state, regional, national VR-business networks.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The agency is in the beginning stages of developing capacity to share key business customer information with staff and allocating critical resources/time to support VR-business relationships, state POC and the network(s).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3. The agency has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fully developed the capacity to gather, disseminate and integrate information to all levels within the organization, the state, regional, national networks and the dual customer. b. Allocated sufficient resources/time to support the POC and all network activities. c. Has systems in place to ensure the accuracy, integrity, reliability, timeliness, security and consistency of the information. d. The information is used in the continuous improvement process and sharing of best practices.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road – Quality of Service



In our conversations with national business representatives, one message was loud and clear: in order to be truly effective, the national, regional and state VR networks MUST maintain a high level of consistency, quality and customer service. Continuous Quality Improvement (see the previous chapter) is the linchpin of any successful business model, whether in the private or public sector. The utilization of measurable outcome data to both assess effectiveness and to inform ongoing process improvement will be critical to both the national network and to each individual state VR agency. The success of the state, regional and national networks will depend on how well performance data is incorporated into the process as a whole. Only by constantly measuring progress can the network hope to meet the expectations of both the business and consumer customers. Feedback from all network participants needs to become the engine of change throughout the process. As challenges and emerging trends are identified, feedback from all parties informs and redirects services, goals and network activities. With the inclusion of measurable outcomes or results in the formalization of VR-business networks, we begin with the end in mind and can map backwards for success.

Building Consistency from Variety

Once again, understanding that each VR agency will have its own unique circumstances, operational objectives and strategic priorities, it will be im-

portant for all network partners to establish data collection and feedback mechanisms that meet their individual needs while at the same time moving each agency toward the “one company” model envisioned by national VR leadership and outlined in this document. While the national network, regional networks and individual state agencies will all be gathering data, each will have its own “flavor” and distinct characteristics, often driven by the current strategic position of the VR agency in their VR-business network development. The overarching goal, however, is consistent and timely service to our national business partners.

As each state begins to develop its own unique role in the national and regional networks, it will be important for them to examine where they are now (benchmarks), where they want to go (goals), what steps, activities, initiatives etc need to happen in order to get there (measurable results), and how information is used to both inform and improve the process (Continuous Quality Improvement). Ideally, as each state agency begins to reach out to/expand in-state, regional and national network partners, additional resources and capacity will evolve. Thus, while an agency will maintain its individuality and uniqueness, it will also begin to incorporate the expertise and ingenuity of its various partners. This dynamic interaction between VR agencies, the business customer, consumer customer and community partners will ultimately benefit the “company” as a whole.

Measuring Success: Results Improve the Process

As the Vermont VR program learned (see Appendix D), one of the most difficult challenges any system will face is moving from anecdotal to measurable data. While anecdotal findings have value, they don’t provide the level of consistency measurable data can provide. For a company to be truly responsive to customer needs and expectations, a “feedback loop” based on measurable data is critical. For the in-state, regional and national networks to be effective, each level will need to develop ways to continuously monitor performance, and to use that information to “tweak” the process on a regular basis. The concept of a “one company” model for VR has been endorsed by both senior leadership and State Directors at CSAVR.

As depicted in the “Critical Components” model above, adequate infrastructure provides the mechanism for results to be both quantified and incorporated into the operations of the “one company”. As data is gathered, it is shared among all partners to increase awareness and to inform ongoing adjustments to the process. Customer satisfaction surveys, focus groups, advisory councils and other feedback loops can all be used to determine ways to improve services and, ultimately, results. Each “franchise” also uses this model

to evaluate its own progress on in-state, regional and national levels in order to become a more effective and consistent partner. This use of a continuous feedback loop is critical to the “one company” goal of consistent services at all levels. This consistency is something every business expects, and indeed demands, from all “vendors,” and the VR-business network is no exception.

Following are some examples of measures in five areas that have been identified in the CSAVR Work Plan for a national network:

- Communication
- Marketing
- Business Development
- Training/Technical Assistance
- Evaluation

Some states and regions have already developed and implemented a variety of measurable outcomes in relation to VR-business networks and those examples have been included below. (Note: these are only examples, and do not represent the many different possibilities each agency and/or region may explore. Variability will be natural; consistency of services will be key.)

Communication

The following are example of actions that lead to the development of an internal communication system. A fully developed system for information sharing, learning and resource creation would be a tangible, measureable result. These examples are not intended to be prescriptive. They are simply some possible intermediate and long-term results that agencies may consider.

Results of Actions at the National Level:

The VR-business network is developing an internal communication system. There are stages that range from the identification of a designated point of contact in each of the 80 VR agencies to the online network which supports ongoing communication and sharing of resources between these VR agencies. The Web site is the external piece that focuses these resources on customers: VR-business and VR-consumers.

Results of Actions at the Regional Level:

1. Designated points of contact from each VR agency in the region meet quarterly to share and update resource materials for use with VR staff, or either of the dual customers, to improve business partnerships and en-

hance employment opportunities for consumers.

-or-

2. Designated state VR points of contact from each state in the region have “met” at least four times annually, via face-to-face or conference call sessions to identify working priorities and goals for the regional development of VR-business partnerships and for the swapping of existing resources.

-or-

3. By 2007, each VR agency in the region will have developed, trained staff on, marketed, and utilized the regional Web site to enhance communication amongst the team and to update the list of employer accounts with a multi-state presence.
4. All network partners are surveyed every 12 months to solicit feedback on communications and resource sharing activities. In developing the survey, each VR agency will identify key indicators of increased participation among partner agencies including resource sharing, increased collaboration, shared databases and other indicators of successful partnering.

Results of Actions at the State Level:

1. State VR directors have identified and provided the appropriate authority to a statewide “designated point of contact” that coordinates VR involvement with business throughout the state among VR staff who work directly with business as well as with partner agencies who represent VR consumers to business. Each designated point of contact will update their VR Director quarterly on progress.

-or-

2. The VR agency has implemented a system to enhance staff communication regarding local and statewide business account development and provision of business services under the leadership of the designated point of contact. Business accounts will grow in number by 10% annually. Or... the volume or scope of services to business accounts will increase by 15% annually. Designated point of contact will update VR staff on business development activities during statewide staff meetings twice annually.

-or-

3. Internal communication systems such as Web pages, routine meetings regarding VR-business partnerships, have been implemented to improve

information sharing about outcomes with business. All Web information is updated monthly to ensure accurate and up-to-date information.

4. VR business partners have been appointed to VR agency boards and SRCs to provide leadership and routine feedback to VR leaders regarding matters affecting their partnership with the agency. Such boards or councils are comprised 25% of VR-business partners.

Marketing

The following examples address possible results that may be achieved through agreement and marketing with a common brand and message, especially to business customers who have a multi-state or national operation and expect consistency in the quality and deliverability of VR services.

Results of Actions at the National Level:

The national VR Business Network Marketing Plan focuses on the development of a brand and marketing materials to be used with business customers. Materials will be developed based on the dual customer with business being the priority in the initial development. Key to this is agreement by all agencies regarding what we can deliver nationally.

Results of Actions at the Regional Level:

1. By July 1, 2007, representatives from each VR agency will have identified the common business services that each state agency can offer to businesses within the region, ensuring deliverability, quality, and sustainability. Business partners will be surveyed every 12 months to get feedback on marketing efforts.

-or-

2. By 2008, each VR region will have a standardized way to refer to the regional VR-business network and will have “branded” the regional approach to business with a common logo. Statewide surveys will be conducted yearly to assess business community awareness of the VR network. Overall business awareness of the network will increase by 15% annually.

-or-

3. By date certain, the agencies within the region will have developed and begun using a generic brochure for business to market multi-state VR services to business based on their needs. Brochure distribution will reach an agreed upon number of new business contacts each year.

-or-

4. Regional representatives will present the network to an agreed upon number of national business and/or trade organization meetings per year.

Results of Actions at the State Level:

1. The VR agency has identified deliverable services that are needed by existing or potential business partners and allocated the resources to provide those services. Businesses will be surveyed two times annually to gather input on needs and satisfaction.
2. Customized VR agency brochures, DVDs and Web pages have been designed with input from business partners and are currently used as the primary method of marketing a consistent message to existing or potential business partners. Business focus groups are convened every six months to review materials and incorporate feedback. Distribution of print materials increases by 25% annually. Web page “hits” increase by 25% annually.

-or-

3. VR staff have been trained on VR agency services to business and have been provided with the resources necessary to deliver those services. VR staff are surveyed every 12 months to gauge understanding of services and to gather feedback.

-or-

4. Businesses within the state recognize the VR brand identity and are currently accessing needed services from the VR agency. Business use of VR services (employment, retention, trainings etc) increases by 25% annually.

-or-

5. Businesses with a multi-city presence in the state are aware of VR services to business and are able to access the same employer services statewide as needed. Outreach activities will target an agreed upon number of new multi-city employers annually.

Business Development

At all levels of the network, it is important to recognize where there are established relationships with business and to develop a targeted outreach plan to develop new customers based on the goals and availability of con-

sumer customers, or in business terms, their future qualified applicants and employees. The following are examples of possible results and/or actions that will produce results in the area of business development.

Results of Actions at the National Level:

The national network has surveyed state agencies to learn where VR is currently doing business, where VR has developed connections that exist across statelines and where there are opportunities to leverage connections from one state or region to another area in the country. The second phase of business development will involve a survey of agencies and consumers to ascertain where VR's consumer customers are looking for employment opportunities and what targeted business development is in line with those goals.

Results of Actions at the Regional Level:

1. By date certain, each VR agency in the region will have identified and shared, via the password protected Web site, the names of the businesses that have a multi-state presence and with whom they have an established relationship. These business contacts will be updated every 3 months by the designated points of contact.

-or-

2. The number of multi-state businesses utilizing the network will increase by an agreed upon % annually.

-or-

3. By date certain: 1) an active multi-state business advisory group will become a part of the regional team of designated points of contact. 2) replication of successful partnerships will occur in a minimum of 6 VR agencies in the region.

Results of Actions at the State Level:

1. A VR employer account system has been implemented statewide allowing appropriate VR staff the opportunity to track account demographics, services and outcomes in order to replicate local partnerships statewide. By date certain all staff will have been trained on the use of this account system. Internal use of the system will increase by an agreed upon % each year. Staff will be surveyed annually to gather feedback on the usability and effectiveness of the employer account system.

-or-

2. The VR agency has implemented a "real-time" statewide "talent bank" of

qualified (job ready) consumers allowing rapid identification of potential job candidates for employer vacancies as well as a mechanism to cluster consumer employment needs for more appropriate business partnership development that meets the needs of both the consumer and the business. Business use of the talent bank will increase by an agreed upon % annually.

Training and Technical Assistance

The VR networks have a vast array of resources and expertise that are useful internally from VR-VR agency and externally with VR customers. Following are examples of results already achieved or those that are possible to achieve by establishing measurable goals and objectives.

Results of Actions at the National Level:

The national network is establishing a VR-VR communication system to share information, supports and resources. This will also offer the opportunity for VR-VR mentoring and training of new staff. These training resources and staff expertise are being used to support the needs of customers for training and technical assistance, with the initial priority on business. This networking is allowing the VR system to leverage the expertise of business in career planning and job search with consumers.

Results of Actions at the Regional Level:

1. By date certain, an assessment of each VR agency in the region, in relationship to the implementation of the regional and national networks has been conducted and analyzed by the regional team of designated points of contact. By date certain + 6 months, the team has addressed the top three needs as identified in the assessment drawing from the strengths of each agency in the region to improve those specific areas within the region.

-or-

2. By date certain, a regional team of designated points of contact will have evaluated the accomplishment of the objectives and strategies within their regional strategic plan for business partnerships and reported those outcomes to the VR directors within the region. VR Directors will be updated on the progress of the network every six months.

-or-

3. VR Directors in the region will meet every six months to determine next steps, challenges and opportunities for the regional and national

networks.

Results of Actions at the State Level:

1. The VR agency conducts annual reviews of business services, assessing outcomes from those services along with identification of emerging business needs and business satisfaction with the services rendered.
2. Businesses have provided direct input to VR leadership regarding the products and services offered to employers and any related strategic plans ensuring that the business perspective has been incorporated into such plans. Businesses are surveyed every 12 months to gather input and suggestions for improving the network.
3. VR staff are surveyed every 12 months to determine training and technical assistance needs with respect to the networks.

Putting it All Together – Maturity Scales

Consider four aspects of a process when measuring the maturity of the VR-Business partnership. Mark Blazey, Ed.D. of the Quantum Performance Group, in his 2004 Minnesota Quality Award Evaluator Reference Book describes the four aspects as follows:

“Approach” refers to

- the methods used to accomplish the process
- the appropriateness of the methods to the requirements of the process
- the degree to which the approach is repeatable and based upon reliable data and information.

“Deployment” refers to the extent to which

- the approach applied in addressing partnership requirements is relevant and important to the organization
- the approach is applied consistently
- the approach is used by all appropriate work units

“Learning” refers to

- refining the approach through cycles of evaluation and improvement

- encouraging breakthrough changes to the approach through innovation
- sharing of refinements and innovation with other relevant work units and processes in the organization

“Integration” refers to the extent to which

- the approach is aligned with organizational needs identified in other Framework Components.
- measures, information, and improvement systems are complimentary across processes and work units
- plans, processes, results, analysis, learning and actions are harmonized across processes and work units to support organization-wide goals

Apply these definitions when reviewing the following maturity scale. Consider the results of the previous self-assessments when reviewing the maturity scale to determine the progression steps your agency can take to develop and implement a set of VR-Business and VR-VR partnerships that reflect a high performing organization.

Level A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» No systematic approach is evident; information is anecdotal.» Little or no deployment of an approach is evident.» Improvement is achieved through reacting to problems.» No organizational alignment is evident; individual areas or work units operate independently. (I)
Level B	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» The beginning of a systematic approach to the basic requirements of the Framework Components.(A)» The approach is in the early stages of deployment in most areas or work units, inhibiting progress in achieving the basic requirements of the organization. (D)» Early stages of a transition from reacting to problems to a general improvement orientation are evident. (L)» The approach is aligned with other areas or work units largely through joint problem solving. (I)

Level C

- » An effective, systematic approach, responsive to the basic requirements of the Framework Components is evident. Senior Leadership is in the early stages of sharing information with Regional VR Leaders.(A)
- » The approach is deployed within the state, although some areas or work units are in early stages of deployment. (D)
- » The approach is in the early stages of deployment within the Region. (D)
- » The beginning of a systematic approach to evaluation and improvement of key processes is evident. (L)
- » The approach is in early stages of alignment with your basic organization needs throughout the VR Agency.(I)

Level D

- » An effective, systematic approach, responsive to the overall requirements of the organization are evident.(A)
- » The beginning of a systematic approach to participating in the National VR-VR and VR-Business Networks are evident.(A)
- » The State and Regional approach is well deployed, although deployment may vary in some areas or work units. (D)
- » A fact-based, systematic evaluation and improvement process and some organizational learning are in place for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of key processes. (L)
- » The approach is aligned with your organizational needs throughout the VR Agency. (I)

Level E

- » An effective, systematic approach, responsive to the multiple requirements of the State, Regional and National organizations, is evident. (A)
- » The approach is well deployed, with no significant gaps. (D)
- » Fact-based, systematic evaluation and improvement and organizational learning are key management tools; there is clear evidence of refinement and innovation as a result of organization-level analysis and sharing. (L)
- » The approach is integrated with your organizational needs identified throughout the VR Agency. (I)

Level F

- » An effective, systematic approach, fully responsive to the multiple requirements of the State, Regional and National organization are evident. (A)
- » The approach is fully deployed without significant weaknesses or gaps in any areas or work units. (D)
- » Fact-based, systematic evaluation and improvement and organizational learning are key organization-wide tools; refinement and innovation, backed by analysis and sharing, are evident throughout the organization .(L)
- » The approach is well integrated with your organizational needs and with the organizational needs of other VR Agencies.(I)

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Portions of this chapter, along with its aligned appendices, are drawn from the work of the Baldrige National Quality Program 2006 Criteria for Performance Excellence. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department's Technology Administration, manages the Baldrige National Quality Program. The American Society for Quality, Milwaukee, WI, administers the Baldrige National Quality Program under a contract with NIST.

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The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence (see http://baldrige.nist.gov/Business_Criteria.htm) provides the basis upon which the section was designed. Go to Appendix E for more information about the Performance Criteria.

Study Questions for Chapter Five

1. The Foundational Principles for the VR-business network include
 - a) Trust
 - b) Immediacy
 - c) Quality
 - d) All of the above
 - e) Both A and C
2. The six critical components of the development and implementation of VR-to-VR and VR-to-business partnerships are
 - a) Trust, Responsiveness, Deliverability, Consistency, Quality, Sustainability
 - b) Customer and Market Focus, Leadership, Work Processes, Strategic Drivers, Infrastructure, Results
 - c) Customer and Market Focus, Leadership, Strategy Development and Implementation, Infrastructure, Human Resources, Process Management
 - d) Informed Choice, Customized Services, Career vs Job, Dual Customer Focus, Collaboration, Recognition
 - e) Trust, Responsiveness, Informed Choice, Quality, Dual Customer Focus, Results
3. (T/F) An agency that is mature in its development and implementation of the Customer Focus component is beginning to use information from existing business relationships to evaluate and improve business services.
4. (T/F) An agency that is mature in its development and implementation of the Human Resources component has a systematic evaluation and improvement process that reflects organizational learning and integration of refinements to better meet organizational needs.
5. (T/F) As each state begins to develop its own unique role in the national and regional networks, it will be important for them to examine benchmarks, goals, measurable results and Continuous Quality Improvement.

Chapter Six

Partnerships and the Networks

Introduction

As the regional and national VR-business networks are developed, VR agencies can directly benefit from the tremendous resources of the many organizations serving people with disabilities. While not directly involved in the network, these community resources are nonetheless critical to extending the reach of the network beyond the VR world.

The key to coordinating these resources is the understanding that relationships need to be developed that allow for two-way information sharing between the VR-business network and the various community resources. If a community rehabilitation provider (CRP) sees an opportunity to recruit a business into the network, a process needs to be in place to ensure the sharing of that information to the VR designated point of contact for the network. Likewise, business relationships developed as a result of network activities will need to be shared throughout this community of providers in order to more effectively meet the needs of these regional and national business partners. Hiring managers aren't particularly interested in where a candidate is referred from, but rather that there is a clear process for that referral.

Understanding that there is no "cookie cutter" approach that will work for all agencies, we will highlight some existing partnerships that can support a state VR agency's participation in the new regional and national business networks. When fully developed, these relationships are both interdependent and mutually beneficial. Again, for the network to be consistent and

effective, information must be freely exchanged with the many community resources available in any given state.

The success of the network will hinge on the development of a model that will serve VR's two primary customers: the business and the consumer. The network will ultimately position VR as a valuable resource for the business customer, not just for qualified candidates, but for other value-added services only VR can provide. Consistency of service delivery (see Framework and Progression chapters) will be critical to this effort.

It's All About Connections: Community Groups

Coordinating the activities of disparate community organizations within the framework of the network will present considerable challenges. Individual community providers tend to be very protective of their business contacts, as are vocational rehabilitation job developers. A concerted marketing and outreach strategy will need to highlight the benefits of the new network, and Memoranda of Understanding or other types of agreements will need to be crafted in order to formalize the process. Marketing strategies could include direct marketing, focus groups, meetings between executive directors and VR state directors or other forms of outreach that will share the purpose and potential benefits of the VR-business network.

State Rehabilitation Councils (SRC)

As a partner to the state VR agencies, SRCs can play an important role in the establishment of the VR-business network. Comprised of representatives of workforce development, consumers, VR staff, community providers and businesses, the SRCs bring an understanding of the VR system as a whole, and the unique challenges and opportunities present within individual states. Working with their respective SRCs, VR leadership can utilize this partnership to enhance the effectiveness and implementation of the network, and to streamline outreach, marketing and internal capacity. Through their involvement in strategic planning and internal policies and procedures, the SRC can support the development of the network while at the same time working with SRCs from other states to build consistency across state lines.

Benefits to the SRC:

- Involvement in implementation and direction of network activities
- Opportunity to provide feedback from members on the direction and coordination of the network
- Build a stronger partnership with the VR agency

- Give a voice to consumers and businesses as the network is established

Benefits to the network:

- Access to input from the key stakeholders represented on the SRC
- Assistance with marketing and support of network implementation
- Connection to SRCs across the country

Projects with Industry

Many states have Projects With Industry (PWI) organizations operating either in concert with the state VR agency or as standalone service providers to job seekers with disabilities. Understanding that the main mission of the Project With Industry program is in direct alignment with that of the state VR agencies, coordinated collaboration with them could be very helpful with regard to the establishment of a regional and national employer network. In many cases, these PWI organizations have extensive employer networks and contacts that could be very valuable to state VR agencies as they develop broader contacts with the business community.

In states where PWI staff work closely with the VR agencies, it will be critical to include them as the business network is developed. In states with PWIs it will be important for the single point of contact housed within the VR agency to develop a close working relationship with their PWI counterparts. The International Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation (INABIR), the Washington-based organization representing the majority of Projects With Industry organizations, could also be a good partner for both CSAVR and individual VR agencies themselves.

Local Business Advisory Councils

A core element of all PWIs is their local Business Advisory Councils, which convene businesses from a variety of industries. These BACs often include members representing nationally and regionally based businesses who work directly with the PWI to increase the employment of people with disabilities within their organizations and in the community as a whole. Linking the proposed business network to these existing networks would be extremely beneficial, providing access to local representatives who could introduce the concept to their national counterparts.

In many states these BACs are linked to their respective Business Leadership Networks (BLNs), and can often share members. While the BACs tend to focus on local employment issues, the BLNs tend to work at the state-

wide level and can often be working on systems change initiatives, employer outreach or other activities. Because many PWIs have extensive employer networks in place, have caseloads of job ready candidates, and often have strong relationships with other community providers, they can be an important partner in the establishment of the VR-business network(s).

Benefits to the Network:

- Increased capacity for employer outreach
- Larger pool of candidates to offer employers
- Marketing capacity
- Use of the BACs as part of outreach and implementation strategies
- Resources for ADA, accommodations and disability awareness trainings
- Capacity for outreach and marketing at the national level through INABIR
- National-level employer connections and relationships through 90+ PWI projects

Benefits to PWI projects:

- Increased access to regional and national employers
- An opportunity for closer collaboration with VR on a state, regional and national level
- Additional job leads generated by the network

Independent Living Centers

Independent Living Centers are typically non-residential, private, non-profit, consumer-controlled, community-based organizations providing services and advocacy by and for persons with all types of disabilities. Their goal is to assist individuals with disabilities to achieve their maximum potential within their families and communities.

Also, Independent Living Centers serve as a strong advocacy voice on a wide range of national, state and local issues. They work to assure physical and programmatic access to housing, employment, transportation, recreational facilities, and health and social services. These are just a few of the services of-

ferred by the IL centers.

As we work to establish a national and regional employment network, IL Centers could play an important role at several levels by providing:

- Outreach to consumers who may benefit from the network
- Assistance and support to business with regard to workplace accommodations, accessibility and community supports for incoming and incumbent workers
- Political advocacy at the state and national levels in support of VR and the network
- Disability-specific training for supervisors, co-workers and support staff
- Job readiness and skills training

Because the Centers are working with persons with disabilities and their families, they are uniquely positioned to support families as they adjust to the many changes that come when a family member begins a new job. For this reason, involving the IL Centers in the network will be important. In cases where an IL Center has an employment component, they will need similar access to the designated point of contact working on the network initiative.

Business Groups

As the national and regional business networks are developed, VR agencies will need to engage with a variety of in-state, regional and national business organizations such as:

- Business Leadership Networks (BLNs)
- Local, regional and national chapters of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
- Local, regional and national Chambers of Commerce

Engaging these business groups can provide a direct link to potential partners and to key contacts within nationally and regionally-based businesses.

Business Leadership Networks

Why is it important that employers talk to other employers? The business community needs qualified workers to fill its changing job requirements. Many employers today are unable to find qualified job applicants through their normal channels of recruitment. Employers participating in BLNs are

responding to this need by exploring methods to more effectively recruit and hire job applicants with disabilities. The BLN is focused on providing businesses with opportunities for peer-to-peer support on issues regarding the employment of individuals with a disability. Support from member companies can provide interested businesses with information on how other companies are actively recruiting people with disabilities and utilizing existing resources. This dialogue also provides employers with a comfort zone to discuss the myths and fears in a non threatening environment, seeking assistance and guidance from other employers.

Many states now have established business leadership networks. Though they may be organized and supported differently in each state, the power of BLNs is their focus on direct employer to employer networking and support to increase the employment of people with disabilities. The value of this peer to peer communication cannot be underestimated, and the potential for the BLNs to provide regional and national contacts can be an important part of a state VR agency's efforts to develop contacts and relationships that will support and help to market this new initiative. For information on BLN chapters in your area please visit www.usbln.com

Employers across the U.S. are finding that there are many business benefits associated with the employment of people with disabilities and the marketing of products and services to customers with disabilities. People with disabilities have much to contribute, and businesses are taking notice by proactively and successfully including disability as a diversity strategy.

SunTrust Bank, President of U.S. Business Leadership Network.

Benefits of Partnering with BLNs

BLNs and Vocational Rehabilitation agencies are working towards the same goal of increasing the employment of people with disabilities. Business has the jobs and VR has the applicants. The need to establish relationships with each other is crucial to promoting best disability employment practices and enhancing employment opportunities. The strength that comes from working together can facilitate new ways to break down attitudinal barriers, stereotypical thinking, and assumptions about what people with disabilities can and can't do. BLNs can help open the door to employment opportunities in a variety of ways. Local BLN chapters sponsor programs and activities which are focused on educating their members and raising awareness of the bottom line business benefits associated with hiring and retaining of individuals with disabilities.

In a perfect world any employer across this country could reach out to their local VR agency/division and immediately identify a partner to assist them with any employment issue related to any disability. That partnership would foster a forum for candid dialogue between VR and Business. Employers could insure that they would never be “attacked” or “accused of insensitivity” around disability issues as they begin their journey of maneuvering through these uncharted waters within any given company/organization in the U.S.

Wachovia Bank, USBLN Board of Directors

This is the time to close the gap between business and VR, to create a partnership that meets the needs of all the customers involved, including people with disabilities, the companies that employ them, and the VR staff that represent them.

*Developing Effective Partnerships with Employers as a Service Delivery Mechanism
3rd IRI Study Group, 1997*

Society of Human Resource Management - www.shrm.org

Building relationships with organizations such as local chapters of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), whose members are human resource professionals and the gatekeepers to employment opportunities, is crucial. VR agencies that have provided funding for staff to become members and participate in activities have realized a significant return on their investment. Through these relationships, human resource professionals have come to understand the business case for hiring people with disabilities and the valuable role VR can play in helping them recruit qualified applicants. Possible SHRM activities could include providing a “Disability Track” at state SHRM conferences, inclusion of awards for businesses that are “Disability Friendly” in SHRM award programs and providing SHRM accredited (HRCI) training for members on a variety of topics such as accommodation, interviewing, disability etiquette and workplace safety.

Chambers of Commerce

Chambers of Commerce can also be important partners who can bridge the gap between employers and public sector disability service providers. Many local chambers as well as the US Chamber of Commerce (<http://www.uschamber.com/cwp/default>) are involved in workforce development issues. Chambers are often a primary gathering point for businesses, and building an alliance with local and state Chambers of Commerce could pro-

vide a tremendous opportunity for the network to build relationships with key employers.

Trade Organizations

Many industries and business sectors are represented at both the state and national level by trade organizations. These organizations provide a forum for industry-specific dissemination of information, legislative advocacy and other activities. The VR-business network can establish relationships with these groups in order to bring visibility to the network and to create awareness of the benefits of partnering to meet workforce needs.

Benefits to the Network:

- Direct access to employers and hiring managers
- Opportunities to market the network
- Position VR as the disability resource for employers
- Connection to national parent organizations

Benefits to Business Groups:

- Establish a relationship with VR at the regional and national levels
- Access to VR resources and expertise
- Qualified candidates
- Connecting national parent organizations with the national network

Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPS)

Each state has its own unique community of service providers who may or may not be directly connected to the state VR agency. Community mental health agencies, Projects With Industry, developmental disabilities providers, state welfare agencies, educational systems and a host of other community-based programs could all be potential partners in the larger regional and national VR-business networks. In many cases, these providers are engaged in work directly related to the mission of vocational rehabilitation, and their ability to contribute to the success of the proposed network is worth noting.

Each state will need to assess the array of community resources available to them, and work to incorporate existing and potential relationships into the development of the regional and national VR-business networks. Community rehabilitation facilities (such as Goodwill Industries, Easter Seals, the

ARC and others), mental health agencies, Projects with Industry and other organizations can all be resources for the network, and every effort should be made to engage them in the process of developing the network.

Benefits to the Network:

- Access to a larger pool of candidates to fill positions
- Increased outreach and marketing to employers
- Information on new and existing employers
- Increased capacity to meet employer needs for workplace supports

Benefits to Community Resources:

- Involvement in the network through the designated point of contact
- Increased employment opportunities for customers
- Access to new employers through the network
- Collaboration with VR

Department of Labor

Another partnership that should not be overlooked in our efforts to ensure that all job seekers with disabilities have access to all available employment resources is the partnership with One-Stop Career Centers.

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) oversees the comprehensive workforce system. ETA's mission is "to contribute to the more efficient functioning of the U.S. labor market by providing high quality job training, employment, labor market information, and income maintenance services primarily through state and local workforce development systems." These services are provided to consumers in the workforce system primarily through the One-Stop Career Centers.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) mandates that the One-Stop Career Centers provide services to customers with disabilities alongside customers without disabilities. WIA also mandates that the One-Stop Career Centers not rely on VR to provide services to their customers with disabilities. Because of this mandate, and the fact that not all individuals with disabilities qualify for VR services, the ETA has taken steps, and invested significant resources, to ensure effective and meaningful participation of people with disabilities

in the One-Stop system. ETA's efforts began in 2001 with the Work Incentive Grants (WIG) and have continued to include DOL's partnering with the Social Security Administration in the Disability Program Navigator initiative. WIA also involves the public VR program on the state or local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB), creating yet another opportunity for collaboration among One-Stop leadership, VR representatives and businesses who serve on WIBs. DOL's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) funds grants on customized employment services for One-Stop Centers and other work-related services for people with disabilities and employers, including the Employer Assistance Referral Network (EARN) and the Job Accommodation Network (JAN).

Findings from the 2004 National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.)/ Harris Poll conclude that almost half (42%) of people with disabilities polled reported being aware of the workforce system's One-Stop Centers. Not only were people with disabilities aware of the One-Stop Centers, but also people with and without disabilities used the services of One-Stop Centers at similar rates.

As job seekers with disabilities look to One-Stop Centers for employment opportunities, the employers that the Career Centers provide services to must be encouraged to consider these candidates in their recruiting and hiring efforts. As a mandated partner in the One-Stop System, and the partner with the most experience in providing employment services to individuals with disabilities, the VR agency can be a great resource in helping the Career Centers ensure that their business owner and human resource professional contacts are knowledgeable about all aspects of including job candidates with disabilities in their recruiting and hiring efforts.

Benefits to the Network:

- A direct link to the extensive resources of the One-Stop system
- Increased access to training and skill development through Individual Training Accounts and WIA funding
- Access to the existing One-Stop employer base
- Opportunity to strengthen collaboration with the One-Stops, including Disability Program Navigators (where applicable)

Benefits to the Workforce Development System:

- Access to the expertise and resources of VR

- Increased capacity to serve individuals with disabilities through the Network
- Improved employment outcomes
- Increased visibility as a resource to workers with disabilities

Disability Advocacy Groups

There are a number of organizations which are directed and managed by persons with disabilities. Associations of the Deaf, the blind and visually impaired, veterans, and those with mental illness are only a few examples. Some of these organizations may provide direct services which include employment preparation and job development services. These organizations can be an important partner in an employer network as they often have more direct contact with consumers and family members than is possible for the VR agency and are in a position to influence and inform consumers. In fact, they are often able to be more direct with consumers than is possible for staff from the public VR program.

Those organizations that provide job development services may have contacts with businesses that can supplement those of the VR professional. Collaborating with consumer organizations when this is possible can also help eliminate the business partner relating with more than one point of contact.

Benefits to the Network:

- Outreach to the disability community as a whole
- Advocacy to support the development of the network
- Liaison to the national disability organizations

Benefits to Disability Advocacy Groups:

- Connection to the national network
- Opportunity to increase employer outreach and education
- Employment opportunities for constituents

National Organizations

While local connections are the underpinning for the development of capacity for the implementation of the network, national connections will also be critical to the success of this initiative. Linking with national orga-

nizations and systems will enable the network to fully develop capacity and responsiveness to the needs of both the employer community and VR customers. Many of the aforementioned “connections” are well represented at the national level, and developing a relationship with these national groups could enhance the overall effectiveness of the VR-business network. These groups can also serve as a conduit to share information on the network with their affiliates and constituents.

Benefits to the Network:

- Provide a mechanism for the sharing of timely, relevant information to support the activities of the network;
- Build relationships that will foster an awareness of the unique benefits of the network to both business and VR consumers;
- Forge partnerships with groups willing to highlight the benefits of the VR program while also advocating for the resources to support the network;
- Expand the awareness and utilization of VR services and expertise by national groups

Benefits to the National Organizations:

- Increased access to regional and national employers
- Opportunity to increase collaboration with VR at all levels
- Enhanced capacity to serve constituents through network activities
- Broader outreach and communication

Partners Summary: Cooperation Not Competition

At the core of all network activities should be the understanding that cooperation and collaboration are critical. Many businesses have little or no direct involvement with VR, even though VR may be providing a host of services directly related to the success of individual employees. The VR-business network will offer the opportunity to position VR as the primary disability resource to employers at the state, regional and national levels. As such, it will be important to establish a spirit of cooperation and communication with the wide range of partners at all levels in order to provide employers the consistency and quality they expect from their business partners.

All network “connections”, whether they are local community resources,

workforce development systems, business groups, PWIs or advocacy organizations, need to understand the importance of collaboration to the success of the network. As outlined above, everyone can potentially benefit from the network, yet without a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities involved, competition can easily limit and/or negate those very benefits. Communication between the designated point of contact and these various groups needs to be clear, consistent and timely in order to minimize misunderstanding and competition.

Recognizing Collaboration

In order to foster this spirit of cooperation, all networks, whether in-state, regional or national, need to build in ways to recognize the efforts of all partners. Whether through press releases, community recognition events or other means, each component of the network must develop strategies to acknowledge the participation, collaboration and support of the various community partners. Each state will have unique relationships and interactions with their community counterparts, so activities to recognize them will vary. Cooperation and collaboration do not take place in a vacuum. Respect for the works of others needs to be both highly visible and ongoing.

An Opportunity for VR

VR has often been an “invisible” partner with the business community, providing a myriad of services to consumers either directly or through services provided by contracted third parties. In many cases, VR involvement is either not disclosed or is overshadowed by other interests. Unfortunately, this has led to a lack of understanding on the part of the business community regarding the value, importance and effectiveness of the VR system. Many employers are unaware of the resources and expertise available to them through VR.

The VR-business network provides a unique opportunity to highlight VR as a viable resource to both consumers and the business community as a whole. By coordinating services and solidifying community relationships, the designated point of contact in the network will be able to offer businesses the quality and consistency they demand. At the same time, business leaders will realize the benefits of working in partnership with VR as they look to become both more diverse and more competitive in the marketplace.

The Ultimate Winners—The Business and Consumer Customers

The “one company” model envisioned in this document, and endorsed by VR Directors and CSAVR, will ultimately benefit both the business customer and the consumer customer by providing in-state, regional and national collaborations that will enhance services, increase collaboration, provide quality service delivery, establish Continuous Quality Improvement and allow for individual VR agency flexibility. As the “company” and its “franchises” develop increasingly diverse connections to their respective customers, more and more opportunities for growth and sustainability will arise. While each state will have unique challenges and opportunities, the “one company” model will provide the basis for consistent, timely and responsive customer service, while maintaining the high level of quality and commitment VR has always provided.

Self-Study Questions

1. (T/F) The key to involving other community resources in the VR-business network is to develop two-way information sharing relationships.
2. (T/F) Organizations that might be viewed as competitors with VR should not be included in the expanded network.
3. (T/F) It is important for employers to talk to other employers through organizations like the Business Leadership Networks (BLNs) in order to provide peer-to-peer support on issues and to explore new methods to effectively recruit and hire qualified job applicants.
4. Involving other community organizations in the VR-business network benefits the network by
 - a) Providing direct access to employers and hiring managers
 - b) Connecting with organizations that can provide political advocacy at the state and national levels in support of the network
 - c) Eliminating competition for business contacts and job openings
 - d) All of the above
 - e) Both a and b
5. (T/F) Recognizing the efforts of community partners through press releases, community recognition events or other means is recommended but not essential to building successful collaboration.

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Appendix A

Topical Links on VR-Business Partnership “Basics”

Following is a topical “search-and-link” list that will assist you in finding additional information about specific issues related to VR-business partnerships that have been dealt with in previous IRIs. It should be noted that, although the language used in the previous IRIs may be somewhat dated, the focus of the publications referenced all relate to:

- improved employment outcomes through partnerships with business, and
- other critical vocational rehabilitation organizational changes that enable VR to more effectively do business with business

VR Services to Employers:

- Types of services – 20th IRI, chapter 6
- Approaches to delivery of services – 18th IRI, chapter 4
- VR services that benefit business and services that benefit consumers – 18th IRI, chapter 5
- Disability management services – 23rd IRI, chapter 3 and 16th IRI, entire publication

Business-Customer Driven VR Organizations

- Characteristics and customer satisfaction – 20th IRI, chapter 7
- Characteristics and benefits of partnerships with business – 23rd IRI, chapter 3
- How to build a partnership with a business – 23rd IRI, chapter 4
- Administrators of VR – challenges & action steps – 23rd IRI, chapter 6

VR Organizational Adjustments in Responding to Business as Customer

- Selling vs. marketing – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Understanding the employer customer – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Shifting from process to employment outcomes – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Flexibility in VR agency systems – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Staff roles – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Use of resources – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Measures of accountability – 20th IRI, chapter 8

Marketing Principles Applied to Business Partnerships:

- Selling vs. marketing – 20th IRI, chapter 8
- Building a partnership with a business – the basics: 23rd IRI, chapter 1
- Preparing for an employer contact – 23rd IRI, chapter 4
- How to approach an employer – business perspective: 23rd IRI, chapter 1
- The visit with the employer – 23rd IRI, chapter 4
- Maintaining a partnership with a business – business perspective: 23rd IRI, chapter 1
- Employer account systems – 23rd IRI, chapter 4
- Language with business – 23rd IRI, chapter 5

- Common employer concerns – 20th IRI, appendix C
- Company/account demographic records – 20th IRI, appendix A
- Responding to employer concerns – 20th IRI, appendix B
- Surveying business customers – 20th IRI, appendix D
- Generic marketing strategies (market analysis, product strategy, etc.) – 9th IRI, entire publication (dated, but still effective)

Appendix B

Previous IRI's Related To VR-Business Partnerships

Marketing: An Approach to Placement – 9th IRI, 1982

1. Overview of Marketing Approach
2. Market Analysis
3. Product Strategy
4. Marketing Strategies
5. Labor and the Marketing Concept
6. Implications for VR Agencies
7. Appendices
 - » American Statistical Index
 - » Employer Account Systems
 - » Financial Incentives to Hiring
 - » Hiring the Handicapped: Myths and Facts

Disability Management in the Workplace – 16th IRI, 1989

1. Historical Overview of Disability Management
2. Defining Disability Management
3. Stakeholders in Disability Management
4. Strategies, Positions and Options for VR

Employer Service Strategies in Rehabilitation – 18th IRI, 1991

1. Introduction to the Study
2. History & Evolution of Employment Services in Rehabilitation
3. Challenges Facing Rehabilitation Agencies
4. Strategies in Employer Services

The Name Of The Game: Employment – 20th IRI, 1993

“The Name of the Game: Employment” identifies the basic elements and action steps to guide VR agencies in becoming the MAJOR player in the employment of people information on:

- » Action Steps for VR to lead its organization in effective partnerships with business (see appendix for list)
- » How to move from selling to marketing and be more effective with employment outcomes
- » Knowing the employer customer
- » Enhancing agency flexibility in responding to the needs of business
- » Modifying staff roles, resources and accountability to support business partnerships
- » Addressing the needs of business
- » Finding the VR “niche” in the employer marketplace

Developing staff expertise and “new” products or services for business

1. Introduction to the Study
2. The Leadership Challenge in VR
3. Rehabilitation In The 1990's And Beyond
4. An Employer's Perspective

5. Internal Analysis of Rehabilitation
6. VR Assets for Employers
7. The Customers in VR
8. Qualities of a Major Player
9. Appendices
 - » DRS Company Record
 - » Employer Concern Matrix
 - » Common Employer Concerns or Objections
 - » DRS Survey of Business and Industry
 - » DRS Employer Services

Developing Effective Partnerships with Employers – 23rd IRI, 1997

1. Successful Partnerships: The Employer Speaks!
2. Successful Partnerships: The Players and the Benefits
3. Successful Partnerships: Why They're Essential
4. Successful Partnerships: How to Build Them

Chapter IV, Successful Partnerships: How to Build Them provides a guide on methods to build one-on-one partnerships between VR and business with clearly identified details in areas such as:

- » Tips from VR business partners on how to approach business to build & maintain relationships
- » Key players in partnerships with business
- » Employer account systems
- » Language with business
- » Action list for administrators who want their agency to build and maintain business partnerships

5. Successful Partnerships: Speaking the Same Language
6. Successful Partnerships: Administrators, Are You Listening?

Chapter VI describes challenges to administrators in developing effective partnerships with employers:

- » Evaluate the role of all employees to ensure their duties and functions support the development and maintenance of employer partnerships.

- » Acknowledge the employer as a customer and reinforce this concept to staff.
- » Design simple, cost-effective, minimally intrusive programs and/or services for employers.
- » Develop and implement policies that reinforce the principle of strong partnerships with employers.
- » Allocate resources to provide the necessary systems, data, and supports for staff.
- » Determine training needs that will enhance employees' abilities to be effective partners with employers.
- » Focus less on process and more on the objective of customer service for employers, as well as consumers.
- » Assess how well the agency delivers services to employers.
- » Develop and maintain relationships with CEOs.

If a Business Advisory Council exists, assure its effectiveness:

- » Establish and encourage relationships with organized labor.
- » Consider innovative approaches to measure agency success in achieving the goal of strengthening employer partnerships.

Appendix C

The VR Region IV Story: The Employment Partners Team

The twelve VR agencies in Region IV's eight states have been working for many years with the strategic goal of expanding state penetration of the existing employer marketplace and furthering the development of untapped markets through this regional approach.

It all began taking shape in the early 1990s. Employment focused, state level agency staff began to look outside their home states for potential resources and ideas to further serve their business customers and seek more employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The RRCEP at the University of Tennessee was approached to facilitate dialogue among this core group representing each VR program in the region.

The first challenge was identifying a similarly focused staff member from each of the twelve states. As passionate employer focused staff were identified, the initial beginnings of a cohesive group began to emerge. The initial phase was bringing these individuals face-to-face for the purpose of exploring a multitude of business-related issues. From the outset it was our region's experience that if you placed passionate employment/employer focused staff in a room, "magic happens"!

Initially, the group's purpose was sharing specific in-state resources currently being used for employer development (e.g., brochures, business surveys, employer services, staff training). Building trust among each other became a dominant theme.

As the group coalesced they discovered their agencies had a mixture of staffing patterns and were spread out across a continuum regarding the acknowledgment that employers are indeed one of our customers. This insight became the group's benchmark (i.e., a foundational principle on which most issues would revolve) learning point. Each agency would require flexibility toward the adoption of knowledge gained and other resources relevant to their own unique agency setting. Over the years, the team began to fully understand and embrace a dual customer-driven VR system as the leading tenet of our organization.

The group began to network in earnest and eventually adopted the name: Region IV Employment Partners Team (EPT). It soon became apparent that, as group sharing increased, there were some basic components each EPT representative should have. These key factors are:

1. Must be a state level staff person.
2. Must have expertise in employer development and a firm grasp of the dual customer partnership ideology.
3. Appointed and supported by the state director.
4. Has access to field staff.
5. Has a vested interest for advocating the VR to VR and VR to business partnership philosophy.

Region IV's executive leadership has been instrumental in maintaining this heightened sense of professionalism and collegiality. With the vision, ongoing endorsement and support of the State VR agency directors, the EPT has continued to grow and refine its efforts.

Over time, individual state representatives started networking with each other regarding ideas focusing on employment initiatives/proven strategies that other members within the region might duplicate. Each liaison understood the uniqueness of their respective state program and, in turn, felt comfortable sharing their strengths as well as weaknesses with other members of the group. As the EPT matured, collaboration for in-state and regional conferences began. Cross-training, resource-sharing, and other HR activities began to flourish. It was during this period that the RCEP for Administration and Management at Georgia State University became an active member. Their primary role was to assist in the provision of infrastructure as well as additional support to the team. The EPT now had two RCEP representatives working in support and facilitative roles.

By 1997, Region IV pooled its monetary resources and commissioned a

marketing survey entitled, "A Study of Employers Perceived Needs and Attitudes in Region IV." This study yielded many recommendations that paved our workplan for the next 7 years. The majority of current effort is a direct result of this initiative.

A technical assistance grant was awarded, which enabled the EPT to create a Business Plan designed for the penetration of the employer marketplace (in the southeast), raising regional capacity in serving the needs of business, and designing training materials/modules. Additionally, marketing videotapes of employers describing why it makes good sense to do business with VR. Finally, this grant afforded the EPT an opportunity to create a dedicated web site and a regional employer database.

In order to remain connected the EPT members (each of whom are designated as the primary points of contact for their state agency) have periodic conference calls in order to plan activities and work on the business plan. They meet face-to-face at least twice a year, usually in conjunction with other meetings such as CSAVR or other regional activities. There is at least one dedicated get-together held in a central location. It affords each member an opportunity to reconnect with their counterparts in the other states within the region. As stated earlier, the facilitation, infrastructure, and logistical support for these meetings is provided by the two RCEPs. Note: It is not the RCEP's role to drive/direct VR staff decision-making; that is the responsibility of the single point of contact personnel (i.e., State VR agency EPT member).

Whenever necessary, other phone calls and e-mails are circulated between the states' representatives and the RCEP. When requests are solicited for information on some critical employment issue, EPT members respond in a timely manner.

The strength of this group can be further measured by both its presence in the CSAVR Employment Committee and its involvement with the newly established CSAVR position dedicated to growing the national VR/business network. Over the years the composition of the EPT has changed. The RCEP representative has been instrumental in consulting with the state director for a likely replacement choice with the goal of maintaining continuity and cohesiveness within the existing group. Because of the established trust between RCEP and state agency director, there is a sense of guarantee that both the state agency and the collective states within Region IV can sustain a trusting relationship and produce deliverable goods.

Benefits of Collaborative Efforts

The state agencies have been able to grow and prosper from each other's

employment-related successes and mistakes. Another advantage expressed has been that the “wheel did not have to be reinvented” regarding most employment issues. Each group member felt comfortable utilizing whatever piece of the design that might work within their respective state.

Obviously the saving of time and money through sharing with each other both internal state resources and regionally developed resources has been beneficial. The EPT has been active in assisting each other with the design of new products that may become attractive for the marketplace.

Another positive outcome has been provided via cross-state contacts with employers, thereby increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Border states within the region, as well as across regional lines, have had very successful outcomes. Some EPT members have been invited to participate as a speaker and/or consultant to other regions of the country.

Finally, these core members have become more highly skilled through ongoing interchanges of information and other resources. This has become a win/win situation for all the vested partners.

Summary

Vocational rehabilitation is on the cusp of redefining itself, especially in light of our dual customer philosophy. The Region IV story is an example of one model that has proven to be highly successful. It is offered to add enhance insight for VR’s leadership and, in turn, outline present mechanisms that build value-added resources for our dual customers. Developing and strengthening business partnerships at the state, local and national level is our mission. Trust, coupled with enthusiasm and commitment, will generate positive outcomes and a win/win situation for all.

Appendix D

Progression Steps: Spotlight On The Maturity Journey: Vermont VR and South Carolina VR

South Carolina VR Department

In the mid-1990s the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD), despite having attained a high level of success over several decades, realized the need for organizational change to meet the rising expectations of 21st Century customers.

Using input from a cross-section of internal and external stakeholders, SCVRD began a continuous improvement process triggered by the establishment of mission, vision and values statements. Key result areas (KRAs) were developed to shape strategic planning. At the center of the efforts was a focus on exceptional customer service enhanced by technology. A team-based customer-driven approach was developed with significant staff ownership and staff-led customer service training.

The agency developed its Program Integrity model, based on a management philosophy emphasizing a balance among productivity, exceptional customer service, and compliance assurance. This was achieved through re-engineering of the service delivery system, which was geared toward more direct client contact through better use of staff and automation of data/service delivery tools.

By 2000 South Carolina state government had begun using the Baldrige Performance Criteria as a basis for annual accountability reports that all state

agencies are required to file. Agencies were required to answer questions and provide results in a format corresponding with the seven Baldrige categories.

SCVRD leadership saw the parallels between Baldrige and the agency's continuous improvement initiatives that had been in development for six years. Using a tool developed by the state human resources department, SCVRD conducted a Baldrige self-assessment and decided to become involved in state-level Baldrige assessment.

The South Carolina Quality Forum, spearheaded by the state's chamber of commerce, sponsors the Governor's Quality Award, the highest Baldrige Criteria-based award in the state. Applicants that do not win the Governor's Quality Award are eligible for Gold, Silver or Bronze Achiever awards based on their progress in implementation of the criteria and their organizational results. The vast majority of applicants and recipients of these awards are from private industry, including some with worldwide impact. SCVRD decided to use the business version of the criteria rather than the health care or education versions because it seemed the closest match to agency mission and values and because of the agency's strong ties with business and industry.

SCVRD applied for the Governor's Quality Award in 2001 and was recognized as a Silver Achiever. While the honor was welcomed the agency quickly learned that the greatest benefit of the Baldrige award process is the feedback report that each applicant receives. Four examiners spent three days at the department's facilities conducting a site visit. Their feedback report outlined agency strengths and, most importantly, "opportunities for improvement," or "OFIs" (Baldrige-speak for "weaknesses!").

Some of the agency's OFIs included:

- A need for more definitive results measures (benchmarks);
- A need to gather and use quantifiable internal and external customer feedback;
- Better communication of goals throughout the agency;
- Employee satisfaction data; and
- Risk management measures and targets.

SCVRD used this feedback report as a basis for much of the strategic planning conducted in subsequent years. The original key result areas were realigned to match the first six Baldrige categories—leadership; strategic planning; customer focus; measurement, analysis and knowledge management; human resource focus and process management. Senior leaders chair

the KRA committees.

Measurable outcomes were a focus, resulting in the further development of SCVRD's Program Integrity model. Productivity is measured through the federally mandated performance standards and indicators. Customer service is measured through surveys of target groups. Compliance assurance ties into federal regulations and agency policies.

A numerical scoring index is used to calculate Program Integrity, which can be measured by caseload, area office, or statewide. The index pinpoints trends and improvement needs, and is tied into an employee bonus program.

Program Integrity

A balance among: Train, Trust, Verify



Key financial results include costs per client served and rehabilitated, SSA reimbursement, and the rate of return on the taxpayer investment when clients become employed.

As OFIs continued to be addressed and the agency built more trend data and comparative data, SCVRD was ready by

2004 to re-apply for the state level quality award. This site visit revealed that implementation of the Baldrige Performance Criteria had progressed to a higher level, and the agency was recognized as a Gold Achiever, just one level below the top award, the Governor's Quality Award. This was the highest recognition level yet achieved by a South Carolina state agency.

Measures specific to employers/business partners include:

- Customer satisfaction surveys and focus groups.

- Training Center revenues. SCVRD owns and operates 23 work training centers in which VR clients perform outsource work for business and industry. In 2005, more than 450 outsource agreements throughout the state accounted for \$16 million used as stipends for clients, raw materials, supplies and other operating expenses of the centers.
- Productivity Rate: recognizing that client needs come first, the centers also have a productivity rate that balances business indicators with client service program indicators. These are specific numerical measurements.

Value creation is driven largely by the voice of the customer. SCVRD has numerous approaches designed to educate employers and business partners and generate response. These include:

- Formation of a business partner network that is a dues-paying division within the state vocational rehabilitation association. This network brings business partners into leadership positions in promoting the vocational rehabilitation program in the business community and in providing recommendations for improvement of the VR process in client training and in meeting the needs of business.
- Recognition and publicity of business partners.
- Creation of business development specialist positions in the VR program. These specialists concentrate on marketing SCVRD training center outsource services statewide and educate employers about job placement and job retention services.
- Separate web pages for each of the 23 training centers on the SCVRD web site. These pages are marketing tools, highlighting key partnerships and providing contact information for businesses and industries interested in partnering with the center in their areas. There is also a Business Partnership Network home page.
- Use of printed resources marketing the VR centers and the Business Partnership Network.
- Presentations at local chambers of commerce, Rotary, and other business-related organizations.

Vermont VR: Baldrige Assessment as an Organizational Improvement Tool

Vermont's senior leadership began this journey by consulting with the VT Council on Quality (VCOQ) subsequently conducting a Baldrige Assessment to determine the "maturity" of the organization. The Baldrige Assessment consists of "internal and external environmental scans" of key stakeholders. In this case, the key stakeholders were identified as:

- Partner Agencies and Service Providers (Projects With Industry, Mental Health providers, Developmental Disabilities providers, Housing Agencies, Transportation providers etc)
- Schools
- Independent Living Centers
- Educational funders (Vermont student Assistance Corp.)
- State Department of Education
- Department of Labor and the One Stop Career Centers
- Department of Mental Health
- Employers
- Consumers and Consumer Groups
- VR State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)

Each stakeholder was asked to complete a questionnaire that focused on the seven Baldrige Criteria. For consumers, a Consumer Satisfaction Survey was conducted in collaboration with the State Rehabilitation Council, and for business customers a series of local and regional focus groups were conducted.

The result of this "environmental scan" was the development of an Executive Summary of the organizational maturity of the VR Agency. Traditionally, the Baldrige process then generates a Strategic Plan that outlines the steps an organization needs to take in order to grow and "mature".

Vermont's Use of a Balanced Scorecard

VTVR worked with the Vermont council on Quality (VCOQ) to establish a "balanced scorecard" approach that would help them develop a coherent strategy for organizational improvement. The Balanced Scorecard reflected

four “themes” that emerged as a result of the Baldrige Assessment :

Key Themes

1. Organizational Effectiveness
2. Prepared Jobseekers
3. Valued and Empowered Employees
4. Effective Partnerships

These four themes were then examined through each of four “lenses”:

Lenses

1. Customer (Consumers, Employers, Community Partners)
2. Financial
3. Internal Learning and Innovation (i.e.: Human Resources)
4. Internal Processes

The goal of a balanced scorecard approach to organizational development is the establishment of measurable indicators as a means to assess progress and challenges within an organization. The use of key indicators is a critical component of this process. Key indicators can include “leading” and “lagging” indicators:

Leading Indicators

Leading indicators are measures that anticipate improvement over baseline numbers. They are goal-focused, and have measurable outcomes as their focus. Leading indicators are predictive versus reactive. Leading indicators are informed by goals and objectives and use targets to determine levels of performance within a particular area of focus. The focus is on activities and initiatives that will take place over the course of the next 3–5 years.

Lagging Indicators

Lagging indicators use “snapshots” to identify baselines, but rely on current or past data rather than outcome measures. Lagging measures can include customer satisfaction surveys, internal staff surveys and other tools that provide information on the organization.

The Pain and Reward of Outcomes and Measures

Although there was considerable buy-in on the part of senior staff, and support from leadership at both the divisional and agency level, everyone

experienced some growing pains. Building on their work with the Vermont Council on Quality, senior staff then began work with Mark Blazey (whose work is highlighted in the Progression Steps Chapter of this IRI) to work on a strategic plan that would help move the VR agency to the next level. It soon became clear that the world of human services tends to operate within the Lagging Indicator paradigm, and that the transition to measurable outcomes and Leading Indicators would require some changes in the manner and frequency of data collection.

The reward of these efforts has been the development of a strategic plan that has, at its core, the use of benchmarks, targets and measurable outcomes. Based on their work with Blazey, the team developed (and continues to refine) a strategic plan that incorporates the 4 themes of organizational effectiveness, prepared jobseekers, valued and empowered employees and effective partnerships.

Appendix E

Progression Steps: The Baldrige Criteria

What are the Baldrige Criteria?

“The Baldrige Criteria provide a systems perspective for managing your organization and its key processes to achieve results – performance excellence.” (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006 Criteria for Performance Excellence, National Institute of Standards and Technology, p4.) “The Criteria are built on the following set of interrelated Core Values and Concepts: visionary leadership, customer-driven excellence, organizational and personal learning, valuing employees and partners, agility, focus on the future, managing for innovation, management by fact, social responsibility, focus on results and creating value, and systems perspective.” (2006 Criteria for Performance Excellence, p.1) These Core Values and Concepts are articulated through the seven Criteria Categories:

Leadership—Examines how senior executives guide the organization and how the organization addresses its responsibilities to the public and practices good citizenship.

Strategic Planning and Deployment —Examines how the organization sets strategic directions and establishes strategic objectives. Deployment examines how the organization translates strategic objectives into action plans and related performance measures.

Customer and market focus—Examines how the organization determines requirements, needs and expectations of customers and markets; builds relationships with customers; and acquires, satisfies, and retains customers.

Measurement, analysis, and knowledge management—Examines the management, effective use, analysis, and improvement of data and information to support key organization processes and the organization's performance management system.

Human resource focus—Examines how the organization enables its workforce to develop its full potential and how the workforce is aligned with the organization's objectives. Examines work systems, employee learning and motivation, and employee well-being and satisfaction.

Process management—Examines aspects of how key production/delivery and support processes are designed, managed, and improved in order to create customer and organizational value.

Business results—Examines the organization's performance and improvement in its key business areas: product and service outcomes, customer satisfaction, financial and marketplace performance, human resources, supplier and partner performance, operational performance, and governance and social responsibility. The category also examines how the organization performs relative to competitors. (2006 Criteria for Performance Excellence, p. 14 – 33.)

The criteria are used by thousands of organizations of all kinds for self-assessment and training and as a tool to develop performance and business processes. Several million copies have been distributed since the first edition in 1988, and heavy reproduction and electronic access multiply that number many times.

For many organizations, using the criteria results in better employee relations, higher productivity, greater customer satisfaction, increased market share, and improved profitability. According to a report by the Conference Board, a business membership organization, “A majority of large U.S. firms have used the criteria of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for self-improvement, and the evidence suggests a long-term link between use of the Baldrige criteria and improved business performance.”

For more information on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Program and the Criteria for Performance Excellence go to <http://www.quality.nist.gov/>.

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