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**Overcoming Workforce Challenges in Vocational Rehabilitation Programs: Exploring Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

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Recruitment and retention of qualified staff are crucial for the effective functioning of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs. However, changes in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and other factors have presented obstacles that strain existing staff and impede the delivery of services, engagement with employers, and the overall effectiveness of the VR program. This paper examines the key challenges faced in recruitment and retention, their impacts on various aspects of the VR program, and possible solutions.

One significant challenge is the restrictive personnel and salary policies and practices. Due to the nuanced uniqueness of the VR program, the location of the Designated State Unit within a Designated State Agency can create bureaucratic obstacles when state systems are tied to a larger authority. Determining organizational structure, position descriptions, salary, advancement, and promotional opportunities can all be affected. This often leads to non-competitive salaries as classification of VR staff simply do not align with the established position classifications. Moreover, the adherence of Qualified Rehabilitation Counselors to the regulations specified in the Rehabilitation Act and CFR 361.18(c) can further limit the recruitment and retention of qualified professionals. A study conducted by CSAVR's Human Resources Personnel Network revealed that 83% of agencies reported decentralized HR processes, resulting in additional bureaucratic layers and prolonged hiring processes. The average time to complete the hiring process was 78.21 days, with a turnover rate reaching 26% in 2022.

Staff shortages and high turnover rates place an immense burden on existing employees, impacting their morale and job satisfaction. The reporting requirements imposed by WIOA and RSA often involve collecting and documenting a vast amount of data and information. Staff members are responsible for gathering, organizing, and reporting this data timely and on an on-going basis. The additional workload has proven to be overwhelming. It removes the counselor from their specialized role, particularly when combined with the added responsibilities of WIOA. Counselors are facilitating work readiness classes, engaging in employer outreach, participating in the development of work-based learning experiences, and job exploration counseling.

This increased workload has led to burnout and stress among staff members, affecting organizational morale and job satisfaction. The changes imposed on the profession since the passage of WIOA in 2014, in the absence of clear guidance for implementing the substantial changes, have contributed to the nationwide recruitment and retention challenges exasperated by the pandemic. These additional responsibilities have detracted the counselors' ability to make program improvements and diminishes their personal connection with participants, leading to a decreased measured impact on individuals' lives and employment outcomes. Agencies often lack efficient data communication and collection systems, skilled IT personnel that has impeded stakeholder engagement and hindered program enhancements.

There is unanimous consensus that turnover in the VR program has significant financial implications. When staff members leave, the agency incurs costs related to recruitment, such as advertising job openings, conducting interviews, and hiring new employees. Additionally, new hires need to undergo training to familiarize themselves with the program's processes, policies, and practices. This training period can be time-consuming and may temporarily decrease overall productivity as new staff members ramp up to full proficiency.

Insufficient understanding of the unique nuances of the VR program including processes and policies among new staff members can have detrimental effects. When new employees are not adequately trained or lack a clear understanding of the program's purpose and operations, they may struggle to perform their duties effectively. This can lead to confusion and errors in delivering services, placing additional strain on existing employees who may need to step in and provide guidance or correct mistakes. The need for constant assistance and the burden of correcting errors increases the workload of experienced staff members and compromises their own productivity leading to burnout in the profession nationwide.

As a result of turnover and inadequate training, a workload imbalance arises within the VR program. Existing staff members have taken on additional responsibilities or pick up the workloads left by departed employees or inexperienced new hires. This imbalance has led to increased workloads, longer hours, and heightened stress levels among staff members. The lack of productivity and increased workload strain the overall functioning of the VR program,

Further exacerbating the issue is that inadequate staffing levels directly impact the ability and capacity to meet the needs of program participants and employers, resulting in delays and compromised service quality. Insufficient staff with specialized skills hampers the implementation of innovative strategies such as rapid engagement.

Another challenge facing VR staff since the implementation of WIOA is the requirement to allocate 15% of the State VR agency's federal award to providing pre-employment transition services in the absence of identifying secondary education as a core partner. This requirement adds complexity to the VR staff's responsibilities as they navigate a sometimes closed-off secondary educational system. These additional responsibilities have been added to current position descriptions yet not accounted for in the hierarchy of class specifications. The challenge arises for a variety of reasons including the lack of training for VR staff in engaging with employers and secondary educational systems that have been resistant to collaboration and may not readily open their classrooms to VR programs. Establishing partnerships and securing cooperation from school districts can be time-consuming and difficult. Adding additional nuance to the existing complexities of the VR program and disregards the unique knowledge and skill sets needed to navigate the complex educational bureaucracy often placed on the counselors. VR staff members must invest significant effort in building relationships, negotiating agreements, and coordinating services with multiple school districts, each with its own policies and procedures. Moreover, the inability to meet program expectations due to these challenges can further strain VR staff. They may face pressure to fulfill the pre-employment transition services requirements while encountering resistance or limited cooperation from school districts. This can lead to frustration and increased workload for staff members who must find alternative ways to meet the mandate. Compounding the problem is a high turnover rate in VR leadership since the passage of WIOA, the slow response in obtaining federal clarification and guidance regarding the implementation of pre-employment transition services. The lack of clear guidance leaves VR staff uncertain, making it challenging to navigate the complexities of collaboration with school districts effectively. The absence of timely and accurate information hampers the ability of staff members to plan and execute strategies, contributing to increased stress and frustration.

With the passage of WIOA, there is a greater emphasis for VR agencies to serve both the consumer and the employer. However, staffing shortages limit their ability to engage with employers effectively. This limitation results in missed opportunities for collaboration and employer involvement in the VR process. Additionally, the reduced availability of staff to provide specialized training and awareness to employers on disability awareness, workplace accommodations, and inclusive hiring practices hampers the development of meaningful partnerships. The limited staff availability also restricts the agency's capacity to develop new programs, such as apprenticeship initiatives, with employers.

Recruitment and retention challenges in the VR field, exacerbated by changes in WIOA, exploited by the pandemic and other factors, have created significant obstacles for existing staff. These challenges strain the delivery of services, undermine the professional counselor’s role, limits the opportunity for engagement with employers, as well as the overall effectiveness of the VR program. Addressing these obstacles requires policy and practice reforms to ensure competitive salaries, streamlined hiring processes, increased support for staff development, and reduced administrative burdens. By prioritizing recruitment and retention efforts and enhancing the professional role of the counselor, the VR field can enhance its ability to serve participants, engage with employers, and achieve positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Several solutions are discussed, including reviewing current processes, utilizing technology, investing in training, and fostering a positive work environment. These solutions aim to optimize operational efficiency, improve service quality, and provide better support to individuals with disabilities.

To address the challenges vocational counselors and VR agencies face, it is crucial to review current processes and identify areas for improvement. This includes optimizing internal processes to increase operational efficiency and productivity. Agencies can effectively handle increased demand with existing resources by streamlining workflows and leveraging process improvement strategies. Additionally, conducting thorough strategic planning and resource allocation ensures that staffing and resources are appropriately allocated to match the demand. Regular reviews and updates of resources help agencies adapt to changing needs. Further, investing in training and professional development programs are essential to upskill existing employees and bridge the skills gap within VR agencies. Agencies would benefit from prioritizing professional development and training staff in the use of technology.

Collaboration with postsecondary educational institutions to further promote VR education and careers among diverse student populations. This collaboration can help shape curricula that align with industry standards and needs in the changing VR environment. Adopting WIOA expectations into Rehabilitation Counseling programs will aid in the effort to increase the number of skilled professionals in the workforce, agencies can facilitate rapid engagement with employers and individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, implementing effective onboarding techniques, such as providing comprehensive training offering a solid foundation of VR’s purpose, knowledge, and resources to new employees, would increase retention. Mentoring programs play a crucial role in retaining VR counselors. These programs offer numerous benefits that contribute to the professional growth, job satisfaction, and overall retention of counselors within the VR field. Some of the key benefits of mentoring programs in retaining VR counselors:

* Skill Development: Mentoring programs allow VR counselors to enhance their foundational knowledge and skills.
* Emotional Support and Encouragement: The VR program is complicated, challenging, and demanding, with VR counselors often facing complex cases and dealing with clients' personal and emotional struggles in addition to the expectation of collaborating with the secondary educational system and in meeting employer’s needs.

Mentoring programs offer a support system where VR counselors share their experiences, discuss challenges, and seek advice from experienced, qualified mentors who have been through similar situations. This emotional support and encouragement help VR counselors navigate difficult circumstances, alleviate stress, and prevent burnout. Mentoring programs increase opportunities to develop client-focused programs such as apprenticeships and internships as a means of training the inexperienced VR counselor in meeting the employer-engagement requirement of WIOA.

Also, of importance to staff retention, is creating a work culture that values employee well-being, professional growth, and opportunities for career advancement, which are vital for the success of VR agencies. By prioritizing employee needs and satisfaction, agencies can cultivate a positive work environment that promotes productivity and engagement. Implementing employee engagement and retention strategies, such as offering competitive compensation, providing growth opportunities, and recognizing achievements, contributes to a positive work environment. Developing effective recruitment strategies, including improving the hiring process and leveraging social media, also ensures the attraction and selection of qualified candidates. Reimagine and create pathways for diverse talent to enter the profession can be done through collaborating with federal and state partners in addition to outreach and engagement with community colleges and university career centers helps target specific talent pools, offers the potential to create internships, scholarships, and guest lectures to raise awareness of the field.

An untapped opportunity exists within VR programs to incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) into VR agency operations can yield significant benefits. AI technologies, such as automated data entry processes, can improve accuracy and consistency in information management. Algorithms can efficiently classify and sort documents, aiding staff in locating relevant information for case files. The integration of chatbots can enhance user experience and alleviate repetitive tasks, allowing staff to focus on more complex client needs. AI can also play a crucial role in compliance monitoring, efficiently scanning documents for adherence to regulations. Strategic use of AI technologies holds the potential to optimize workflows, improve services, and ensure regulatory compliance for VR agencies.

To aid in recruitment of new staff it is important to establish DEI-focused strategies that actively seek diverse candidates and ensure equal opportunities for all applicants. This may include targeted advertising in underrepresented and underserved communities, partnering with organizations serving diverse populations, and participating in career fairs and events that attract diverse talent.

Engaging with professional associations and networks related to community engagement or employment to promote VR through disability services organizations, counseling agencies, and advocacy groups. Attending networking events increases VR exposure within communities to connect with qualified professionals in related industries. Utilizing job boards and mailing lists in multiple areas such as, in the community, with postsecondary educational institutions, and with professional organizations such as the Association of People Supporting Employment increases the opportunities to outreach to individuals specifically interested in VR. By tapping into multiple networks and sometimes overlooked resources, this can increase the pool of candidates for employment.

Other strategies recommended are increasing awareness and engagement with community and employers by leveraging existing networks to better serve the employers; increasing collaboration with workforce development boards, one-stop centers, and both local and national business associations to promote VR; and developing new programs for increased training and awareness within the community, with a focus on employers that will lead to a shared workload.

Several issues, strategies and solutions have been discussed related to the recruitment and retention of VR staff. Through many lenses, it is apparent that there is a need for a variety of improvements to attract highly diverse and skilled professionals into this field. It is imperative for VR to continually assess and adapt their processes, training programs, and ensure the capacity to effectively meet changing demands and needs in a dynamic business environment. The key to long-term success for VR begins with an honest assessment of current systems to ensure continuous improvement and flexibility. Some additional key elements of change should include researching best practices, collaborating with state government to make a positive impact on both individuals with disabilities, employers, and the state’s workforce, and leveraging federal resources to access guidelines and potential state and federal funding. Additionally, working with advocacy groups to build support for the enhancement of VR would bring attention to this need. Exploration and implementation of these options could improve retention and recruitment for State VR agencies.