Organizational Change: Thinking Outside the Office - Navigating the Future of VR[1]

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Vocational Rehabilitation (hereafter "VR") has a long history of adapting to emerging challenges and responding to the evolving needs of individuals who experience disabilities and want to pursue employment and independence. Over the past 100 years the VR program has evolved in its scope and service delivery model when societal and cultural norms have recognized the moral and human benefit of empowering individuals with disabilities. In the Spring of 2020, VR was presented with a new challenge in the form of a spreading virus and the resulting pandemic that has huge implications for VR staff, vendors, employers, WIOA partners, and ultimately for our consumers. COVID-19 has forced the VR agencies to, yet again, consider a new path forward for service delivery in our agencies. Recently Mr. Mark Schultz, the Commissioner of the Rehabilitative Service Administration, US Department of Education, noted that over 75 percent of the 78 VR agencies are "using a hybrid model, where there were some services being provided remotely, and others that were being provided to some type of remote service provision."[2] Undoubtedly, VR will overcome this challenge and be more responsive to consumer needs on the other end of this global health crisis, but the immediate task is to identify current issues related to COVID-19 and to provide guidance for continuous programmatic improvement.

A cohort of VR professionals from the 2019-20 National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI) considered the external and internal factors[3] that were impacting the VR

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[1] This organizational study was designed and completed by participants in the 2019-20 Cohort of the Executive Leadership Seminar Series, National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute, Interwork Institute, San Diego State University.

[2] Transcript from RSA Quarterly Teleconferences with VR Agencies, August 12, 2020.

[3] The four frames used by the group are based on the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their text Reframing Organizations, 6th Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2017.

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agencies as a result of COVID-19. This team wanted to identify some of the emerging training needs, ethical considerations and desired programmatic changes that could assist VR agencies adapt to immediate needs presented by virtual work. It was agreed that a survey would be a good instrument to use to evaluate these needs and identify recommendations for long term and lasting improvements to deliver VR services. The goal of this exercise was to explore tangible actions that VR directors, managers, training units and RSA could take to better equip the VR agencies with the resources and professional development opportunities to improve services for consumers in this new virtual and hybrid environment.

The NRLI team developed a survey with nine questions (see Appendix A). Two questions were designed to collect demographic information and seven questions focused on training needs, barriers, and essential skills to equitably serve consumers. The questions were developed in an open-ended format to elicit thoughtful responses in a narrative fashion. This required the team to analyze the responses and synthesize them into groupings of recommendations that can be found at the end of this paper. The survey was distributed to all the members of the 2019-20 NRLI group. There were 25 partial responses and 15 completed surveys. Of the completed results the representation was as follows:
- Six were from General Agencies,
- Six were from Combined Agencies, and
- Three were from Blind Agencies.

What We Learned from the Survey Results

Most VR agencies identified the same or similar challenges for staff development in response to COVID-19 and the rapid move to virtual workspaces—new technology, difficulty in utilizing technology differently, existing in person training and service delivery models are not effective in a virtual environment, and pervasive work-life imbalance. The survey responses indicate that in the new virtual workspace, VR agencies are providing online, web-based training for staff on a variety of topics and have intentionally increased the frequency of contact with staff working remotely. However, no single vision emerged for comprehensive staff development to address the broad range of training needs. Some of the VR agencies are in the process of developing training goals, realizing that most trainings will need to be conducted virtually given the impacts of COVID-19. One agency highlighted their investment in racial equity, including a staff development component. Similarly, another agency called out the need for manager and staff trainings on cultural diversity, including examination of systemic racism and bias in relation to consumers, staff, and recruitment and hiring practices. The need for disability specific training was noted, as one agency increasingly hires counselors with social work and business degrees rather than the traditional vocational rehabilitation degree.

As expected, the most common barriers to staff development in the virtual workplace included the lack of computer equipment, unstable or no internet connectivity, lack of proficiency in utilizing technology differently and virtual platforms, as well as

accessibility. Seven responses highlighted as barriers to staff training the lack of established expectations and distractions, including: multi-tasking; addressing needs of children and other situations in the home; lack of dedicated workspace; online fatigue; and lack of engagement. VR agencies also reported a loss of personal connection in the virtual environment that has become a barrier to staff development and service delivery. In-person trainings and meetings offer traditional opportunities for people to build relationships and support systems that may not be occurring in the virtual workplace. Also, it was noted that the training content and delivery methods utilized for in person training have not effectively transferred to the virtual environment, particularly in relation to addressing different learning styles, participant engagement, and absence of non-verbal communication which many rely on when in person.

The survey explored the skills VR staff need to develop to equitably serve consumers virtually. A predominate theme was the need for staff to become "familiar" and "comfortable" with technology and virtual platforms and develop effective communication skills, including the ability to provide descriptions and ask questions to illicit pertinent information. One VR agency offered that the staff development challenges were not about skill but rather confidence and the need to rely on technology. This has left some staff struggling with the reality that they are not meeting with consumers in person. Some responses included the need for flexibility, utilizing methods of communication that best meet the needs of the individual consumer, and ensuring appropriate supports so that consumers can participate virtually. Surprisingly, only one response to the question of equitable service delivery affirmed the need for multiculturalism and anti-racist training, noting that these issues create division with consumers and among staff and that training focused on diversity and inclusion leads to stronger teams.

Recommendations for Staff Development in a Virtual Workspace

While the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014 was a call to action, COVID-19 forced VR agencies to innovate quickly by developing new strategies, testing new approaches, and pivoting to meet changing conditions. This is a time of punctuated equilibrium or an unprecedent opportunity to create a future with an intentional shared vision, flexibility and transparency at all levels, and transformative actions.

Today we face the beginning of what very well could become a much deeper recession lasting far longer than the last Great Recession, starting in 2007. This new recession was brought on by radically different factors, namely a global pandemic that has forced employers and individuals to reconsider how they work and live. Research conducted by H. Stephen Kaye revealed strong evidence that the 2007–09 recession disproportionately affected workers with disabilities. That recession resulted in a nine percent decline of workers with disabilities in the employed labor force after the end and recovery of that recession.

When we consider the interventions that assisted in the recovery from the last recession, we know that our actions must be radically different and we need to embrace the *Innovative* spirit of WIOA to seek out new solutions. Investing in staff development

is a key component of this transformation and the following provides seven high level recommendations for VR agencies to consider as we navigate these uncharted waters. This list is not exhaustive but reflects the themes that emerged from the research of this project.

1. Remote Service Delivery

Remote service delivery increases opportunities for consumers regardless of geographical location to participate by eliminating travel, reducing the time commitment, offering appointments and trainings outside of normal business hours, and increasing capacity for group activities and trainings. Successful remote service delivery requires more than adjusting existing in person practices but developing new strategies and techniques that uniquely compliment tele-VR, which includes any remote or virtual VR service. Consider the following areas when developing training on remote service delivery:

- Developing rapport, shared vision, and expectations with consumers.
- Working with consumers who may be at risk in a virtual environment may warrant ethics training for non-counselor staff who also work with consumers.
- Identifying individual training needs, as well as specific demographic groups.
- Identifying appropriate supports for consumers to actively engage and participate in tele-VR.
- Encouraging engagement and retention.
- Establishing a community of practice to support staff and develop an ongoing basis for collaboration.
- Creating an inviting, professional space at home or in the office free of distractions.
- Developing systems to receive continuous feedback.
- Focus on staff self-care.

2. Flexible Policies and Procedures

In responding to COVID-19, a significant amount of time and focus has been on eliminating barriers resulting from various well-intentioned policies and procedures developed and revised over time. Wet signatures, limitations on telework, and traditional work schedules are examples of self-imposed barriers or command and control type policies and procedures. Rather than simply revising these types of policies and procedures to address a current need, focus on maximum flexibility, efficiency, effectiveness, and whether the policy or procedure supports the flexibility needed to best meet the individual consumer's needs through a traditional office visits, virtual workspace, or and remote service delivery.

3. Shared Vision of the Virtual Workplace

Engage with staff to develop a shared vision of the virtual workplace, including etiquette, expectations, creating new ways to connect, and maximize the value of telework. Develop standards and indicators for telework to measure work and productivity.

- A virtual workplace is a workplace that has multiple locations, but not necessarily the same all the time, as business is done over email, mail, internet and video. Employees within the organization communicate with each other through such technology, as well as the staff communicating with their consumers.
- You can google virtual workplace etiquette and come up with endless ideas, such as dressing appropriately for a meeting, being aware of surroundings, muting microphones when you're not talking or announcing yourself when you enter a meeting. Each VR agency will need to identify what rules of etiquette they want to follow and enforce.
- VR Agencies will need to clarify expectations and employees need to set boundaries for themselves while working at home.
- It is important to set up regular communications between employees and supervisors as well as within employees. Sandy Hardy-Smith with Imagine Enterprises, Inc. recommends having mentor or buddy systems for staff to engage with.

4. Investing in Accessible Technology

VR agencies must invest in technology for now and for the future in order to continue providing superior services. They must diversify their technology to ensure that all staff and consumers with different abilities and disabilities can access it. The technologies include computers, assistive technology, web-based, teleconferencing software and web portals. For web-based technology, The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are organized by four main principles, which state that content must be POUR: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. Moreover, they must take into consideration accessibility as well as the usability of all technology.

5. Technology Training

Training in the use of technology should be available for staff and consumers to enable them to access the content as technologies advance. Train staff on different technologies so they become proficient, comfortable, and confident as well as able to train and support their consumers.

- We all can probably name several types of technology or virtual platforms that we use in our personal and work lives. Agencies will need to identify the purpose for the technology (i.e., staff training or consumer meetings) and then the actual technology that will be used. A simple google search for virtual platforms results in many different virtual software platforms.
- Factors to consider when selecting your platform include cost, ease of use, audience type and size and purpose of use.
- Agencies will need to determine the right fit for their agency and then the right software to fit the need. Many platforms are free and easily accessible; others have fees associated and might not be accessible for everyone.
- Some platforms are good for 1:1 or small meetings while more advanced systems will be needed for larger meetings or meetings that require more participation.

- Phone calls, conference lines or even facetime could be options for counselors to engage with consumers. These options should be easy to use and readily available to ensure the consumer is able to access and use it. More sophisticated technology is likely warranted for staff training, especially with larger groups when engagement is required.
- Agencies will also need to consider access to technology for the customers they serve. Will VR need to consider purchasing technology, such as smart phones, tablets or computers as well as internet service?

6.   Ethics

Although the survey did not ask about ethics directly, some responses addressed ethics in regard to Tele-VR. In addition, our group discussed some ethical issues pertaining to the provision of tele-VR. Some of the issues are:

- Confidentiality, privacy and web security: One of the pillars of VR is confidentiality. Addressing this issue in a virtual world is very complicated. First, we should insure the security of the platform that we are using to connect with our consumer. Making sure counselor and consumer are in a private space in which no one walks-in to listen to the conversation.
- Technology and social media rules: The teleconferencing platforms make the boundaries between counselor and consumer difficult to maintain. They may mislead consumers into believing counselors are available at all times of the day and night for immediate response. VR staff will need to set clear boundaries such as when consumer can contact staff. Moreover, VR staff should think about "friending" consumers or use private social media to engage with consumers, even if it may be easier.
- Informed Choice: Consent and informed choice are essential, as it is the consumer's choice whether to receive services virtually. VR staff should have skilled discussions without encouraging or discouraging participation in virtual services that include the discussion of security, risks, acknowledgement that some heavy topics may come up, confidentiality, and disclosures if others walk in or overhear.

7. Call-To-Action

Due to COVID-19, VR agencies across the nation had to think differently to continue providing rehabilitation services to their consumers with disabilities. They demonstrated resiliency and they embraced the spirit of innovation developing remote service delivery, Tele-VR, within a very short time. Yet, not all VR staff are equipped or have the necessary skills and knowledge to become successful in the new work environment. Therefore, we encourage all universities with graduate programs in Rehabilitation Counseling to embrace this opportunity and develop Tele-VR training for their students and to become partners in this call to action. Some strategies could be to:
- Collaborate with local and national VR programs to have up to date Tele-VR service delivery models included in their curriculum.
- Engage with VR agencies and have VR staff as guest speakers to describe the changes VR agencies have embraced in this virtual service delivery environment.

- Include ethics classes expressly concerned with Tele-VR service delivery that meets the Rehabilitation Counselor Certification's Code of Ethics (CRCC Code).
- Work with VR agencies to develop equitable and enriching internship opportunities for students that need to complete a field internship placement in rehabilitation services that will utilize Tele-VR service.

Concluding comments: Thinking Outside the Office – Navigating the Future of VR

The VR agency is in a unique position to be able to work with job seekers with disabilities in a new paradigm. While many of the employers around the world are shifting the way they conduct their business, we are seeing emerging opportunities for people with disabilities. Many are embarking into the workspace of virtual platforms. The benefit of this could be a universal design approach that creates more accessibility for VR consumers to participate in the labor force in ways that were not considered options prior to the pandemic. This optimism is what the VR agency needs to harness because reflecting on the past and the disproportionate impact that the previous recession had on people with disabilities clearly shows that VR is vital to the recovery and advancement for people with disabilities moving forward. Investing in staff development is essential to the success of VR, as we continue responding to the emerging challenges of the pandemic and navigating the future.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. If you had the chance, what training would you have offered the staff to prepare them for COVID-19, teleworking and remote service to support staff; first line VR staff and supervisors and managers?
2. How have Vocational Rehabilitation staff training needs changed since the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic?
3. What steps is your agency taking to provide staff training to fit current needs during this time?
4. What are the greatest barriers identified for staff development as in the virtual workplace? Please explain?
5. What skills do VR staff need to develop to equitably serve consumers virtually? What types of training could assist them in developing these skills?
6. What is your Agency's vision for staff development over the next five years? Please include goals, strategic plans, tools and resources staff will need to achieve the goals for staff development.
7. What regulatory clarification do you need from RSA and what training and guidance would you need from WINTAC and/or other organizations (please name those organizations)?