



## Technical Brief #9

**Improving outcomes for vocational rehabilitation (VR) collaboration with businesses: Survey and focus group findings from VR business consultants and business leaders**

### Overview

The Knowledge Translation for Employment Research (KTER) Center (<http://www.kter.org>) at American Institutes for Research (AIR) is funded to test a knowledge broker model in vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency settings. Knowledge brokers are individuals positioned to bridge the worlds of research and practice (Long, Cunningham, & Braithwaite, 2013). As part of the interventions it develops to test for its research, the KTER Center trains staff from VR agencies how to act in a knowledge broker role. For example, existing trainings in the KTER Center's ongoing studies of knowledge brokering in VR contexts include online modules about (1) adult learning, (2) research on the employment of adults with autism, and (3) research on preemployment transition services. VR supervisors are involved in those studies. Data are collected from participants to learn impacts on knowledge gains and attitudinal changes among study participants and the staff they supervise, as well as on client employment outcomes.

Another set of VR staff with whom the KTER Center is working is the National Employment Team ([the NET](#)) headed by Kathy West-Evans of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the KTER Center's partner. The NET, an initiative made up of VR business consultants who operate as single points of contact for the businesses with which they work, exists to improve working relationships and marketing effectiveness with businesses (Haines et al., 2018). NET members function as business consultants in support of the dual-customer approach to VR, where VR agencies consider businesses as customers, similar to how people with disabilities are treated as customers (Haines et al., 2018). In this marketing and corporate relations role, NET members have the opportunity to work with a variety of companies across industries, including large-scale businesses and industry leaders within the retail, health, and technology sectors. The knowledge broker training the KTER Center will offer to NET members will support this dual-customer approach by bridging the gap of research to practice in a meaningful way that helps the NET enhance business relations.

To guide content development for this upcoming knowledge broker training, the KTER Center has engaged in several forms of outreach to NET members. The KTER Center works closely with members of its [Technical Working Group \(TWG\) for Business Outreach](#), consults regularly with its partners at [CSAVR](#), and presents at conferences that VR staff attend. As part of this set of activities, designed to identify informational needs, KTER Center staff (1) conducted a survey of NET members and (2) held focus groups with NET members and the business leaders with whom they work. These efforts will help determine the topic for a scoping review (a literature review to identify and map out evidence, providing a broad overview of a topic; see Aromataris and

Munn, 2017). Research from the scoping review will be used to develop the knowledge broker training for NET members.

## Survey Methods and Results

In June 2018, KTER Center researchers began this outreach by conducting a survey of NET members to determine what kind of information needs they had that were most important to them and the businesses with which they work as related to promoting the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities. The survey presented two lists of topics, developed from an analysis of 13 focus groups that the KTER Center had conducted in 2011–12 with members of the business community regarding areas of research they thought could benefit their disability initiatives. KTER Center staff updated these topics in consultation with its TWG members and divided them into two categories: information or training for (1) business consultants and (2) business leaders. Consequently, the survey consisted of two sections: topics for businesses who work with VR agencies (eight topics) and topics for NET members (five topics). Survey respondents indicated their level of agreement (from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*) as to whether the businesses they serve may need additional information on the business topics and whether they, as NET members, may need additional information and training on the NET member topics. The survey also asked respondents if they would be willing to participate in follow-up focus groups to help interpret results. KTER Center researchers contacted all 80 NET members for survey participation; 47 members responded, for a response rate of 59%. KTER Center researchers analyzed survey responses for each list of topics and rank-ordered them by level of agreement.

Survey responses suggest the following topics are most important for **businesses working with VR agencies**:

- Identifying the return on investment (ROI) for employing, retaining, and advancing the careers of people with disabilities
- Recruiting applicants with disabilities to apply for jobs
- Initiating dialogue with and accommodating individuals with “invisible” disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, mental health disabilities)
- Understanding and practicing disability etiquette

Survey responses suggest the following topics are most important as training or additional information for **business consultants**:

- Business success metrics (e.g., impact of VR on hiring)
- Business needs assessment methods
- Outreach and communication strategies for business consultants to use with businesses
- Relationship-building strategies with businesses

## Focus Group Methods and Results

Using the results from the survey, KTER Center researchers developed structured protocols for two sets of focus groups, each set centered around the relevant topics for either NET members or business leaders. The goal of the focus groups was to refine the NET survey findings to narrow down the scoping review topic selection. Topics revealed by the survey as most important for business consultants were discussed during the focus groups with NET members, and the topics that the survey findings suggested would be most germane to NET members' abilities to meet businesses' needs were discussed in the focus groups with business leaders. At the end of each focus group, participants rank-ordered by importance the topics they had discussed.

Between July and October 2018, KTER Center researchers held four focus groups with NET members and business leaders. The KTER Center leaders worked with the NET to identify and recruit leaders in the business community who had familiarity with the NET to participate in the focus groups. Individuals recruited had current or recent experience working for large companies (40,000–262,000 employees) that represent a variety of industries, such as retail, accounting, and technology. Six NET members participated in the first two focus groups, and five business representatives participated in the third and fourth focus groups.

In each focus group, a KTER researcher led the meeting from the protocol, asking questions about each topic and encouraging equal contribution to the discussion from all participants. For example, in the focus group for business consultants, the KTER researcher introduced the topic “business success metrics” and addressed several questions to the group about this topic, such as “How does understanding business success metrics help you to consult with businesses?” Each focus group was recorded, the audio was transcribed, and KTER Center staff conducted content analysis of the transcript data. Project leaders from the KTER Center and members of its Business Outreach TWG reviewed and finalized the analyses.

Results from the focus groups provided valuable insight into each of the topics from the NET member and business leader perspectives, some examples of which are illustrated by the following quotes.

### Business Consultant Focus Group Quotes

- “We need a way to explain [to our staff] why businesses...operate the way they do.”
- “Any tips that could be provided...[on] how we can fairly quickly research a company that we are interested in approaching so we can walk in with a sense of their needs.”
- “It’s been a difficult thing [knowing] what to track, how to track, and what does it mean.”

### Business Leader Focus Group Quotes

- “Knowing the business really well can help bring in quality candidates that produce; this may require understanding a business’s mission and core values.”
- “Helping a company understand all that’s possible...some companies might be in one place thinking they need x, y, and z, but have not considered the other letters in the alphabet.”
- “CSAVR and the local state business [consultants] need to understand the needs of the business and help them connect the dots.”

## Next Steps

Overall, the focus group results suggest that the following topics should be considered for the scoping review:

- Outreach and communication strategies
- Business needs assessment methods
- Business success metrics (e.g., ROI)

These results will inform next steps for the scoping review and the ultimate development of a NET member training.

## References

- Aromataris E., & Munn, Z. (Eds.). (2017) *Joanna Briggs Institute reviewer's manual*. The University of Adelaide, South Australia: The Joanna Briggs Institute. Retrieved from <https://reviewersmanual.joannabriggs.org/>
- Haines, K., Soldner, J. L., Zhang, L., Saint Laurent, M., Knabe, B., West-Evans, K., Mock, L., & Foley, S. (2018). Vocational rehabilitation and business relations: Preliminary indicators of state VR agency capacity. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 48*, 133–145.
- Long, J. C., Cunningham, F. C., & Braithwaite, J. (2013). Bridges, brokers and boundary spanners in collaborative networks: A systematic review. *BMC Health Services Research, 13*, 158.