



Business Roundtable Report

Employer Engagement in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

Health Care



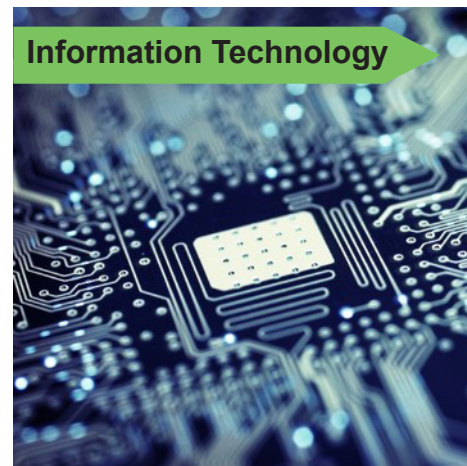
Banking



Federal Contracting



Information Technology



U. S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
Rehabilitation Services Administration

Thank You

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) would like to thank the businesses that participated in the roundtable discussions, and the representatives of those businesses who graciously provided us with frank, open conversation about their employment needs and how we and our programs can best assist them in addressing these needs. We would also like to thank our collaborators and their representatives who assisted us with recruiting employers to attend the roundtable and in shaping the agenda. These include:

- [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation](#) (CSAVR)
- [Government Contractors Association](#) (GCA)
- [American Health Care Association](#) (AHCA)
- [National Organization of Nurses with Disabilities](#) (NOND)
- [National Association of Federal Credit Unions](#) (NAFCU)

Finally, we would like to thank [New Editions Consulting, Inc.](#) and their partner, [Maher & Maher](#), for their assistance with this effort.

Introduction

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) is a Federal agency housed within the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). RSA administers a variety of programs that focus on empowering individuals with disabilities to maximize employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society. RSA's mission is to provide leadership and resources to assist State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and their partners in providing VR and other services to individuals with disabilities to maximize their employment, independence, and integration into the community and the competitive labor market.

RSA is appropriated approximately \$3.3 billion each fiscal year to administer its various programs. Of this appropriation, approximately \$3.1 billion is devoted to the VR State grant program, under which funds are awarded to designated State VR agencies within each State to operate a comprehensive VR program. This State-operated program is designed to assess, plan, develop, and provide VR services to eligible individuals with disabilities consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice. By providing services in this way, the VR program assists individuals with disabilities to prepare for and engage in competitive integrated employment.

The VR program is an eligibility-based program that serves approximately 1 million eligible individuals with disabilities per year. In order to be eligible for VR services, an individual must be an "individual with a disability," meaning a person who (a) has a physical or mental impairment that constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment for the individual and (b) must be able to benefit from VR services to achieve an employment outcome.

RSA averages approximately 200,000 employment outcomes per year. Of this number, approximately 35 percent of current VR consumers are youth with disabilities aged 14–24, and this percentage continues to rise. Effective VR planning and implementation for persons with disabilities generally require a much broader spectrum of service delivery

than job training. For individuals with disabilities, and particularly for youth with significant disabilities, effective VR services planning and implementation require VR counselors to work in tandem with various education systems, job training programs, Medicaid, independent living centers, housing and transportation authorities, and, in particular, with businesses and employers. To ensure individuals with disabilities have the education and skills necessary to be successful, RSA is leveraging resources across ED, including general and special education, postsecondary education, adult and career and technical education, and independent living, as well as other agencies across the Federal government.

On January 30, 2014, President Obama issued a [presidential memorandum related to job-driven training for workers](#). The memorandum states:

Giving workers the opportunity to acquire the skills that they need to pursue in-demand jobs and careers is critical to growing our economy, ensuring that everyone who works hard is rewarded, and building a strong middle class. Despite recent employment growth, far too many hard-working individuals still have not been able to find a job or increase their earnings, and many businesses report difficulty hiring workers with the right skills for jobs that they want to fill.

It is critical that the Federal Government ensure that its policies and programs in the workforce and training system are designed to equip the Nation's workers with skills matching the needs of employers looking to hire. To achieve this goal, employers must identify the skills and credentials required for in-demand jobs and help develop training programs; workers and job seekers must have access to education and training that meets their unique needs and the requirements for good jobs and careers; and employers must have easy ways to find workers who have or can acquire those skills. We must take steps to ensure that all relevant Federal programs follow such a job-driven approach to training, and that these programs are accountable for getting Americans into

good jobs and careers as quickly as possible. That is why I have asked the Vice President to lead a Government-wide review of relevant Federal programs.

On July 22, 2014, President Obama signed the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\) \(P. L. 113-128\)](#) into law, which superseded the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and amended the Rehabilitation Act, which is contained in Title IV of WIOA. The passage of WIOA—a bipartisan and bicameral effort—marked the most significant reform of the Federal adult education and workforce development system in more than a decade and presented tremendous opportunities to change the way our systems operate. Through WIOA, we look forward to streamlining the way we do business in order to shape the nation’s employment and training system into one that continues to provide improved outcomes for all job seekers, workers, and employers. WIOA supports innovative strategies to keep pace with changing economic conditions and calls for improved collaboration between adult education, VR, and workforce development agencies—not just at the State and local levels, but at the Federal level as well. WIOA provides expanded training and employment opportunities for the millions of youth and adults served annually by our systems. Together, with our partners at the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services, and with the continued efforts and commitment of States and local providers performing the work on the front lines, we can make a difference for those individuals who have the greatest barriers to employment by offering them enhanced access and clear pathways to good jobs making family-sustaining wages.

We strongly believe that two of the core purposes of WIOA are to ensure that (1) individuals who face barriers to employment, such as individuals with disabilities, receive the services and supports they need to acquire the skills necessary to obtain competitive integrated employment; and (2) employers receive the training, technical assistance (TA), and other services they need to understand and tap into the full potential of individuals with disabilities in the workforce, for example through supported employment or customized employment. Through these efforts, we believe that individuals with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities, have more employment opportunities.

In implementing the amendments to the Rehabilitation Act, RSA is focusing on several key areas, including work-based learning; employer engagement; career pathways for individuals with disabilities; transition services, including pre-employment transition services; TA; and innovations. In the two years since WIOA was enacted, RSA has been working with its other Federal partners, with the State VR agencies, and with the business community to address these areas.

RSA determined a need to engage in discussions with businesses at the national level for two primary reasons. First, RSA recognized the need to strengthen the relationship between the State VR program and employers. Second, RSA sought to support the initiatives contained within the Vice President's job-driven training report and the requirements of WIOA related to engaging employers in the VR process to employ individuals with disabilities in competitive integrated employment.

The RSA Commissioner conducted a series of roundtable discussions with business and industry leaders in 2015 and 2016. These roundtable discussions focused on employment in four high-demand business areas in the following sectors: Federal contracting, banking/finance, health care, and information technology (IT). The purpose of these discussions was to engage the employer community in dialogue concerning their human capital needs and challenges, skill needs and job requirements, recruitment strategies, and methods to employ more job seekers with disabilities.

Business Roundtables: Findings & Opportunities

This report presents a summary and an analysis of the roundtable discussions and results. The report also presents these findings in relation to several of RSA's current activities and the work of the State VR agencies. Additionally, recommendations are presented in two broad areas: (1) recommendations for improved employer engagement and (2) recommendations for meeting the needs of businesses.

Summary and Analysis

As the country continues its economic recovery, unemployment rates are decreasing for Americans. However, there remains a significant gap for job seekers with disabilities

seeking to find and retain employment compared with job seekers without disabilities. Specifically, of the nearly 30 million Americans with disabilities ages 16 and older in 2015, only 19.5 percent are participating in the labor force as compared to 68.5 percent of the population without a disability ages 16 and older. The unemployment rate in 2015 for persons with disabilities ages 16 and older is 10.7 percent, compared to the unemployment rate for persons without a disability ages 16 and older, which is 5.1 percent ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics News Release, June 21, 2016](#)). Further, it is important to note that WIOA emphasizes competitive integrated employment for employees with disabilities, while businesses are struggling to find and obtain qualified candidates to fill their vacancies.

In accordance with Federal initiatives, such as the [job-driven training report](#) and the requirements of WIOA, RSA and the State VR agencies are making systemic improvements to their programs to address the needs of both businesses and job seekers with disabilities to improve competitive integrated employment outcomes. The success of these collective efforts hinges on the need for State VR agencies to identify and implement additional strategies to provide quality services and supports for these two customer types.

In order to improve competitive integrated employment outcomes, RSA is addressing the needs of both employers and job seekers. This requires an emphasis on:

1. promoting more engagement among State VR agencies, employers, employer associations, workers, and recruitment professionals to identify the needed skills and supports;
2. providing training to VR counselors and other VR professionals so they may help individuals with disabilities obtain jobs, increase earnings, and advance in their careers; and
3. providing quality information and TA to workers, job seekers, and employers regarding job demands, skills matching, job supports, education, training, and career options.

Collectively, these objectives are designed to assist job seekers with disabilities to develop marketable skills that meet the workforce needs of businesses. These objectives align with WIOA and promote partnerships among VR agencies, businesses, and individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment.

RSA and State VR agencies have been proactively focusing on working with employers. For example, RSA recently funded technical assistance centers (TACs) and model demonstration programs that, among other things, develop business sector partnerships and the delivery of TA and training for State VR agency leaders, counselors, and related professionals. The TACs and model demonstration projects include:

- [Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center](#) (JD-VRTAC)
- [Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center](#) (WINTAC)
- Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities Model Demonstrations (Career Pathways) in [Georgia](#), [Kentucky](#), [Nebraska](#), and [Virginia](#)
- [Transition Work-Based Learning Model Demonstrations](#) under the Disability Innovation Fund

RSA-Hosted Business Roundtables: Overview

The Commissioner of RSA sponsored a series of four business roundtable discussions to engage the employer community in a meaningful dialogue concerning their human capital concerns, skill needs and requirements, and the work experience opportunities they offer and how they can be used to employ more job seekers with disabilities. The findings of these roundtables will be disseminated by RSA and its sponsored TACs and will serve as the basis for policy and practice recommendations for State VR agencies.

We have a campus recruitment program focused on hiring people with disabilities. We developed a toolkit for recruiters to educate them on what external organizations they can partner with and how to leverage internal employer network groups.

— Banking Industry

Dr. Andrew Houtenville of the University of New Hampshire and New Editions Consulting, Inc. provided a supplemental labor market analysis to verify that key

industries recommended by RSA represented fast and large growth industries. This analysis included (a) examination of the compound annual growth rates (i.e., the anticipated growth year per year); (b) data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics; and (c) an assessment of industry infrastructure (e.g., strong leaders and associations), receptivity to disability, and the breadth of jobs that require varied levels of hard and soft skill sets.

From this analysis, RSA selected the following industry sectors for the roundtable discussions: Federal contracting, banking/finance, health care, and IT. Each sector possesses occupations with a wide range of projected compound rates of change (growth), staffing qualifications, and average salaries. Findings from the industry analysis are below:

- *Federal contracting* spans several sectors and employs approximately 20 percent of the American workforce, or 28 million people. Two subsectors that align with service components associated with Federal contracting are the “administrative and support services” and “professional, scientific, and technical services” industries. These are anticipated to have 1.8 and 2.1 compound annual rates of change through the year 2024, respectively, with subcategories such as “office administrative services,” “facilities support services,” “employment services,” “computer systems design and related services,” “management, scientific, and technical consulting services,” and “other professional, scientific, and technical services” exceeding these numbers.
- Approximately 6 million people are employed within the *banking/finance industry*. This industry is expected to experience a 10 percent growth by 2022. The banking/finance industry is labor intensive, requiring staffing with a broad range of skills and experiences. Subcategories, such as “funds, trusts, and other financial vehicles,” “monetary authorities, credit intermediation, and related activities,” “lessors of nonfinancial intangible assets (except copyrighted works),” and “securities, commodity contracts, and other financial investments and related activities” have anticipated compound annual change rates of 2.9 to 3.4 through year 2024.

- The *health care industry* employs more than 10 percent of the American workforce, or approximately 14.3 million workers. Similar to banking/finance, health care is a labor-intensive field comprised of occupations requiring a wide range of formal training and experience, with the numbers employed in the field expected to expand significantly. Several subcategories within the health care industry are expected to lead this expansion, with “hospitals; private,” “outpatient care centers,” “other ambulatory health care services,” “offices of physicians,” “medical and diagnostic laboratories,” “home health care services,” and “offices of other health practitioners” possessing anticipated compound rates of change from 3.1 to 3.3 through 2024.
- The *IT industry* employs approximately 2 million American workers. IT comprises the computer systems design, software publishing, and data processing/hosting fields. Though the breadth of skill sets within the IT industry is narrower than in many others, employment within the field commonly leads to highly lucrative positions, particularly for individuals with specialized training. Although growth is expected across the IT industry, several subsectors within it are expected to experience high levels of growth. Areas such as “satellite, telecommunications resellers, and all other telecommunications,” “wireless telecommunications carriers (except satellite),” and “software publishers” are expected to have compound annual rates of change ranging from 4.1 to 4.7 through the year 2024.

New Editions recruited corporate leaders from 30 employers (small, medium, and large) to participate in the roundtable discussions, with consideration given to recruiting employers not possessing previous relationships with State VR agencies as well as emerging and minority-owned firms. Although designed to be open-ended, the facilitated conversations explored the following topics in depth:

- human capital needs/challenges and opportunities
- skills and requirements
- general recruitment strategies
- strategies for recruiting and hiring individuals with disabilities
- action items and recommendations

We seek partnerships that provide full life cycle support, not just recruitment but ongoing coaching and manager support. It's easier to leverage external expertise than build talent inside.

— Banking Industry

RSA-Hosted Business Roundtables: Specific Findings by Industry Sector

While many findings were shared across the industry sectors, the roundtables surfaced some findings unique to each industry. The following table presents these industry-specific findings.

Industry Sector	Industry-Specific Findings
Federal Contracting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular turnover of millennial-age employees. • Likely not meeting the goal of having employees with disabilities represent 7% of the entire workforce of the Federal contract. Employees are reluctant to self-disclose the existence of a disability. • Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) skills are needed. • May require working at a Federal job site, requiring a high degree of interpersonal skills.
Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need experienced employees. • Hiring full-time versus part-time staff and hiring experienced versus inexperienced individuals is heavily dependent on the supply of skilled candidates in the local labor market. • In communities with a low supply of skilled staff, employers experience significant turnover of qualified/experienced employees due to high demand for experienced employees and the offer of competitive/higher wages.

Industry Sector	Industry-Specific Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles in hospitals extend beyond just health care; they also include physical plant and hospitality roles. • State VR agency employees who are “embedded” within a health care facility develop a high degree of understanding of the employment opportunities available and earn the trust of the employer.
Banking/Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in military/“Wounded Warrior” hiring. • Prefer a single recruiter within multiple markets who can supply large numbers of qualified candidates. • Need for “soft skills” not commonly found among less experienced candidates.
Information Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need highly specialized software skills; knowledge of both cutting-edge and legacy software. (Participants referred to this as “finding a unicorn.”) • Skill requirements evolve rapidly. • Employee retention is a challenge. • Federal contracts often have strict qualification requirements—less of a challenge with commercial IT work. • Specialty recruiters are frequently used to identify employee candidates with highly specialized skill sets.

RSA-Hosted Business Roundtables: General Findings

Across the four industries, three themes emerged:

- increasing State VR agency understanding of industry, as well as specific businesses within those industries;
- understanding human capital needs; and
- establishing employer partnerships with State VR agencies.

Increasing State VR Agency Understanding of Industry

Industry representatives expressed that State VR agencies need to enhance their understanding of the business community and its staffing needs. Within this theme, participants placed particular focus on the specific hard and soft skills needed within

VR has screened and referred talent and paid for job coaches for several of our employees with disabilities in one of our locations. We are currently expanding the model across the country to source from a larger talent pool for the company.

— IT Industry

their industries. In-depth and current knowledge of an industry would assist State VR agencies in identifying the credentials needed for employment, where there may be a demand, and where there may be an oversupply. This knowledge is best obtained through contact with industry, preferably with local employers who can share their specific needs and enhance State VR

agencies' understanding of the skills needed in specific work environments.

Furthermore, this knowledge changes as industry needs change. Real-time understanding of industry needs, particularly within local economies, is necessary to train individuals with the skills that are needed currently and expected for the future. This needs to be coupled with knowledge of the needs and work practices of specific employers and/or affiliates or subsidiaries of multisite businesses so that individual, trusted relationships between State VR agency staff and hiring officials can develop. Through the development of these relationships, State VR agency staff can mitigate the disadvantage of acting on dated or aggregate skill need information. Possessing this real-time community- and employer-specific information is a challenge experienced by training partners, colleges, and universities as well.

Placement in a position does not necessarily guarantee success in a position. Industry stakeholders frequently described the need for soft skills, or interpersonal skills, among employees, and their necessity for successfully maintaining a job. State VR agencies

and job candidates could develop a better understanding of the soft skills necessary for a specific environment through exposure to industries in their communities and, preferably, to the work sites of local employers. In addition, VR counselors should follow up with placements to ensure that these soft skills and interpersonal skills are satisfactory for the maintenance of employment.

VR provides us with a single point of contact and has convened a team to strategize on accommodation needs. Services include conversations to understand needs at the local level, screening candidates, job coaching for individual situations, and identifying placements.

— Federal Contracting Industry

Understanding Human Capital Needs

At present, the roundtable participants rely primarily on recruitment resources such as staffing firms and recruiters who specialize in serving their industry, possess candidates with the necessary skills and credentials, and are able to recruit nationally. Roundtable participants expressed a preference for working with singular, trusted, specialty recruiters over the use of myriad recruitment resources where the likelihood of finding qualified employee candidates is less certain. Schools and training programs are considered essential resources for finding candidates, with interns often becoming permanent employees. Some roundtable participants indicated they were not aware that State VR agencies had access to higher-skilled employee candidates.

Establishing Employer Partnerships with RSA/State VR Agencies

The roundtable participants were largely receptive to partnering with RSA and State VR agencies, but they possessed limited knowledge of what State VR agencies could

We changed our hiring policies to target people with autism. Rather than interviewing candidates face-to-face, we learned we can get a better feel for a candidate's capability if we conduct the interview while walking around the company.

— Health Care Industry

provide them. Small businesses possessed the lowest level of awareness of RSA and State VR agencies, while large firms questioned whether they could provide qualified candidates in a timely manner and at the quantity needed by the employers. Businesses wanted to know why they should recruit from State VR agencies. They also believed that it was necessary for State VR

agency staff to come to their job sites to build trust and understanding of their particular companies. Communication with executive leadership needs to occur in the language of business and with RSA and State VR agency staff of similar professional stature.

Finally, the roundtable participants would like RSA and State VR agencies to provide ongoing TA, helping them hire, retain, and advance individuals with disabilities. The majority of roundtable participants did not believe they were meeting the disability accommodation needs of their employees. Many viewed this as a challenge due to limited self-disclosure among their employees. The participants proposed that RSA and State VR agencies could help them in identifying methods to encourage their employees to disclose and to determine accommodation needs and solutions for those employees who need them.

RSA-Hosted Business Roundtables: Sector Specific Concerns and Needs

There were surprisingly few concerns and needs that were truly unique to a single industry. Both IT and Federal contracting representatives discussed the need for specialized software skills. Finding employees with these skills was presented as challenging due to competition (resulting in rapid employee turnover among the IT participants) and to requirements such as work location and formal education criteria among the Federal contractors. Finding skilled candidates who meet specific criteria and are willing to stay with an employer was considered challenging. Representatives from the IT industry, specifically, were looking for “unicorns”, i.e., candidates with highly specialized skills and credentials who also meet desired demographic and salary considerations. They were highly interested in whether RSA and/or State VR agencies were able to help them find these candidates.

We work closely with community colleges to incorporate soft skills lessons in the technical training.

— Health Care Industry

We serve on college advisory boards to share job projections and skills needed to assist them in developing curricula.

— Health Care Industry

In the health care industry, employer interaction with potential employees was described as being highly influenced by the number of credentialed candidates available. In communities that are flush with candidates, health care employers

were able to be more selective, offer fewer hours to new hires (part-time versus full-time), and require potential hires to participate in unpaid internships prior to selection. In more competitive markets, health care employers were more likely to offer full-time employment and to “take a chance” on a hire. In these markets, in particular, retaining experienced staff was seen as challenging due to offers of higher wages by competitors.

Although expressed by all of the industry participants, representatives of the banking industry placed particular emphasis on the soft skills of its potential hires. This may be due to the breadth of customer service roles within the industry. These skills were seen as difficult to assess during an initial interview, but critical to retention, advancement, and long-term success.

We invest in mapping out critical success factors at each of our career levels. We work with employees to help them self-assess and develop a bit of a roadmap so they know the skills needed to get to the next level. It's costly, but helps with retention—shows employees that you are willing to invest in them and prepare them for growth.

— IT Industry

RSA-Hosted Business Roundtables: Small versus Large Business Needs

The similarities between the needs of small and large businesses outnumber the differences, although several distinctions between them were expressed by the roundtable participants. Chief among them were the resources available for recruiting employee candidates, the challenges associated with retaining highly skilled employees, and the difficulties in offering the breadth of supports, accommodations, and benefits available at large businesses compared to smaller employers. National searches, whether conducted by an employer or a specialized recruitment agency, require an expenditure of resources that may not be available to a small employer. For

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this reason, small employers tend to recruit locally, a practice that may be challenging in communities with fewer viable candidates.

Smaller firms, to a higher degree than larger firms, found it difficult to retain highly skilled employees. They were often recruited by larger, higher-prestige businesses that were able to offer higher salaries and more extensive benefits. This was most frequently described as a challenge within the IT field, with firms such as Google recruiting their most valuable staff. Lifestyle within a smaller community was seen as a potential retention tool, but not always an effective one.

Small employers were also concerned with whether they could provide the breadth of supports and accommodations required by an employee with a disability, or whether the supports and accommodations would represent “an undue burden.” They were largely unaware of tax credits available to support hiring and accommodating employees with disabilities. They were similarly unaware of the resources potentially available to them through their State VR agencies to accommodate these candidates if hired.

The findings from the business roundtable discussions align closely with the requirements of WIOA and the objectives of the job-driven training report. WIOA and the job-driven training report are designed to serve two customers: job seekers and employers. Job seekers want to know where the jobs are, while employers want to know where to find viable candidates. Additionally, WIOA requires that service planning occurs in collaboration with industry by identifying the needs of businesses and focusing funded training efforts to meet those needs. The WIOA approach to working with industry aligns nearly perfectly with roundtable participants’ statements. All roundtable

We created an internship pilot program focused on people with autism in data analytics, cybersecurity, and software testing. We learned that it's not just providing these interns an inclusive environment; it's also important that colleagues understand them and what they need. These employees are interested in a career and feedback on their job performance, but also want feedback on their social skills. The program has been successful and is being expanded to more locations.

— IT Industry

participants indicated an interest in RSA and State VR agencies learning more about their industries in order to develop and refer job seekers with the most appropriate skills. Although RSA and State VR agencies were not highly recognizable by the majority of roundtable participants, there were several who had more recent experiences with State VR agencies and saw them as critical to the success of their disability employment efforts.

Recommendations

The findings of the roundtable discussions are consistent with many earlier reports from employers on what they want from State VR agencies. It is similar to what they want from other employment-related government programs, such as the American Job Centers/One-Stops. They want RSA and State VR agencies to obtain more information on what they need and how to provide it to them. Currently, RSA and the State VR agencies are placing an increased emphasis on improving employer engagement and addressing employer needs.

RSA routinely conducts outreach efforts to the employer community to inform its job-driven efforts, identify areas of employer needs, and assist State VR agencies in developing the skills of job seekers to meet those needs. These business roundtable discussions were specifically designed to explore the employment needs of fast- and large-growth industries and how individuals with disabilities can be integrated into companies within these industries. Many recommendations emerged from the roundtables.

RSA is in a unique position to provide TA to respond to opportunities and is already addressing many of them. RSA's TACs and demonstration projects are currently developing resources, TA products, and providing intensive and targeted TA interventions to support State VR agency system changes that will improve efforts to collaborate with the business community.

Recommendation 1: Align Training for Job Seekers with Disabilities with Job Opportunities

The roundtable participants recommended that RSA and the State VR agencies align training and TA for job seekers with disabilities with the job opportunities currently available at the national and local levels. RSA is using its TACs and demonstration grants to enhance the capability of State VR Agencies to better train job seekers with disabilities via intensive TA. Intensive TA involves the TACs providing services to a State VR agency through a stable, on-going negotiated agreement to implement a purposeful, planned series of activities to make changes to its policies, programs, practices, or operations. JD-VRTAC is currently addressing the need to align candidate training with skills needed by employers through intensive TA efforts that include emphasis on customized training specifically designed to employer requirements. JD-VRTAC has intensive TA agreements with 18 State VR agencies that support systemic changes to assist job seekers in developing marketable skills that meet the labor force needs of businesses.

There are other TAC activities that support business engagement with the State VR agencies and the workforce development system. WINTAC and JD-VRTAC collaborate to provide training and intensive TA in the use of the Career Index Plus, a tool to inform career path decisions and from which to glean basic information about industries and occupational requirements. TACS are also collaborating to provide training and intensive TA in the areas of pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities, including ways to collaborate with State workforce agencies and local American Job Centers. Further, the Career Pathways demonstration grants are assisting State VR agencies in coordinating with employers, business and manufacturers associations, educational and training programs, and community service providers in developing accessible training programs for job seekers who use State VR services that align with regional employment needs.

Recommendation 2: Incentives for Businesses to Partner with the State VR Agency System

The roundtable participants were largely unfamiliar with the ability to and advantages of partnering with State VR agencies, especially with respect to recruitment of employees with disabilities. There is a financial advantage for businesses to partner with State VR agencies for employee recruitment. State VR agencies can work with employers to:

- recruit qualified applicants who are individuals with disabilities;
- provide training to employees who are individuals with disabilities;
- provide opportunities for work-based learning experiences (including internships, short-term employment, apprenticeships, and fellowships) and opportunities for pre-employment transition services;
- assist with utilizing available financial support for hiring or accommodating individuals with disabilities; and
- provide consultation; TA; support to employers on workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and facilities; and workplace access to enable employers to recruit, job match, hire, and retain qualified individuals with disabilities who are recipients of or applicants for VR services.

In addition, there are tax credits available to businesses through the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#) (WOTC), which is a Federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain [target groups](#) who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment. One of the target groups is VR-referred individuals, which includes individuals with disabilities who have completed or are completing rehabilitative services provided by:

- a State-certified agency, or
- an Employment Network under the Ticket to Work program, or
- the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs.

JD-VRTAC assists State VR agencies in enhancing or developing “Business Relations Units” composed of specialists who are trained to act as liaisons with the employer community. These liaisons serve as trusted counselors to the business community and

promote the opportunities available through the State VR system for staffing, including increasing diversity, influencing the training of motivated job candidates, accessing State and Federal hiring credits, and obtaining accessibility and accommodation consultation.

Recommendation 3: Promote Awareness of State VR Agencies

The roundtable participants, particularly the participants from small employers, recommended that RSA and the State VR agencies promote the program to employers of all sizes both nationally and locally. Efforts to promote State VR agencies to employers are currently underway. Several States have adopted a “dual customer” approach to their VR services, describing the opportunities available through working with State VR agencies to employers as well as individuals with disabilities.

Emulation of this approach is a component of the intensive TA agreements of several State VR agencies receiving support from JD-VRTAC. The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) offers similar support to employers through national resources such as the National Employment Team (the NET), a network of 80 State VR agency programs acting as one organization to address employer needs. This resource is supplemented by CSAVR’s Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP), a national database of individuals with disabilities pursuing employment, which also includes opportunities for employers to place job announcements specifically targeting this talent pool. Career Pathways grantees have developed branding and marketing materials for both job seekers and employers. These materials are evolving, with programmatic outcomes and success stories being added as they become available.

Recommendation 4: Expand the Existing State VR Agency Employer Engagement Focus

The roundtable participants recommended that State VR agencies create employer-engagement focused staff positions and expand their employer engagement activities. As a component of JD-VRTAC’s TA, State VR agencies are expanding or developing employer engagement-focused staff. Some agencies are hiring personnel specifically for this role, while others are using existing staff.

JD-VRTAC provides the State VR agencies supplemental training through webinars, self-instruction toolkits, and peer support through a Community of Practice. For example, one State VR agency is receiving support from JD-VRTAC to develop business satisfaction surveys to guide their continuous improvement in employer engagement.

Recommendation 5: Invest in State VR Agency Staff Professional Development

The roundtable participants recommended that State VR agencies invest in professional development activities related to employer engagement for their staff. Several of RSA's TACs have elements focused on training State VR agency staff and engaging businesses and industry organizations to help shape the curricula. They are also tasked with measuring the effectiveness of these efforts and identifying promising practices. For example, JD-VRTAC provides training and consultation to VR agency staff on Career Pathways-aligned career counseling, identifying individuals who can benefit from work-based learning experiences (including internships), and increasing the use of apprenticeships. JD-VRTAC provides TA and staff education in four topic areas related to the job-driven training report, including:

- use of labor market and occupational information by State VR agency staff and customers for purposes of career planning and Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) development;
- consultation with employers around individual needs of persons with disabilities in the workplace (services directed to help employers work with individuals with disabilities in the workplace at the individual level of employer engagement, such as accommodations, assistive technology, and similar services);
- building relationships with employers (the system level of employer engagement, such as employer account systems, State VR agency business representatives, the TAP and the Net, etc.); and
- providing customized training, which is job-related training designed specifically to meet the needs of particular employers.

Further, some State VR agencies have their own training curricula and many of their staff members already excel at business partnerships. The roundtable participants strongly recommended that State VR agencies use single points of contact in communicating with employers.

Recommendation 6: Develop Direct Business Connections

The roundtable participants recommended that RSA and the State VR agencies increase direct business connections across all sectors and industries. Currently, State VR agencies have relationships with employers, especially around providing access and improving services for job seekers with disabilities. However, these partnerships can be strengthened by improving employer engagement in order to meet the employers’ labor workforce needs. This can be accomplished through an understanding of the labor market needs of the various business sectors, direct business connections, and an understanding of specific employer needs.

The table below summarizes the needs and related recommendations gleaned from the roundtable discussions.

Needs Identified through Roundtable Discussions	Related Recommendations for RSA and State VR Agencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase understanding of industries and business community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align training for job seekers with disabilities with job opportunities Expand State VR agency employer engagement focus Invest in State VR agency staff professional development Expand or develop direct business connections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding industry and specific employer human capital needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align training for job seekers with disabilities with job opportunities Expand State VR agency employer engagement focus Invest in State VR agency staff professional development Expand or develop direct business connections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing employer partnerships with State VR agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create incentives for businesses to partner with the State VR agency system Promote awareness of State VR agencies Expand State VR agency employment engagement focus Invest in State VR agency staff professional development Expand or develop direct business connections

Moving Forward

The mission of RSA is to provide leadership and resources to assist State VR agencies and their partners in providing VR and other services to individuals with disabilities to maximize their employment, independence, and integration into the community and the competitive labor market. RSA's grantees include State VR agencies receiving Title I VR formula grants, TACs, demonstration projects, and others. Each grantee is charged with improving the competitive integrated employment outcomes for RSA's primary stakeholders—individuals with disabilities, particularly those with significant disabilities—through either direct or system-focused services.

RSA and the State VR agencies, in accordance with the job-driven training report and the requirements of WIOA, are introducing systematic improvements to address the needs of both businesses and job seekers with disabilities to improve competitive integrated employment outcomes. RSA is actively engaged in meeting many of the expressed interests of the roundtable participants. For example, at present there are 34 intensive TA agreements with State VR agencies, and of this number, at least 18 are specifically focused on improving employer engagement activities and activities related to better understanding the labor market, occupational requirements, and skills valued by employers.

WIOA provides an expanded authority on employer engagement. RSA will continue to provide TA and support to VR agencies to improve collaboration with business. RSA is conducting additional analyses exploring nuances within the data provided by the case service reports from State VR agencies, the data collected by the TACs, and information provided by its partner agencies to best serve its dual customers. Insight from these activities may contribute to improvements in current efforts, including the development of new guidance and TA webinars, toolkits, or effective practices that can be included in new intensive TA agreements with State VR agencies.

RSA plans to continue to work with State VR agencies directly and through its network of TACs to increase employer engagement and to meet employer needs. In particular, RSA will continue to prioritize and emphasize current relevant practices such as:

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- continuation and expansion of employer engagement systems that build relationships with employers and establish processes for providing services and supports to employers who hire individuals with disabilities;
- continuation and expansion of efforts to work with human resource firms and organizations that focus on diversity and talent acquisition for employers to improve the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in these avenues of access to jobs;
- implementation and expansion of systems that support access to and use of labor market information that can inform State VR agency staff and individuals with disabilities about industries, occupations, and the skills and other work requirements of employers as a starting point to understand and work with employers in the local areas to facilitate vocational planning, job placement, employer supports, and job retention for individuals with disabilities;
- continuation and expansion of efforts to provide services to employers that are coordinated with multiple partners in the workforce development system;
- continuation and expansion of coordinated career pathways activities; and
- continuation and expansion of customized training programs that are designed to address specific employer skills needs and job requirements.

RSA plans to continue to work with State VR agencies directly and through its network of TACs to increase employer engagement and to meet employer needs by focusing on the items listed above.

RSA may also identify new or additional strategic opportunities through the implementation of WIOA or through TA activities or demonstration projects that will enhance RSA's efforts to meet the objectives, and spirit, of the job-driven training report, the requirements of WIOA, and the needs of its consumers with disabilities and the business community. Some WIOA-inspired possibilities to explore include:

- how to encourage State VR agencies to implement State and local roundtables as a starting place for developing relationships with employers, where appropriate;

- the development of partnerships with other Federal agencies that provide employment services to individuals with disabilities in order to collaborate and align services to employers from the Federal level;
- how to encourage State and local partnerships that align or coordinate the delivery of services to employers and individuals with disabilities at the State and local levels in order to facilitate job placement;
- how to create collaboration and coordination among Federal agencies of Federal TA providers for the purpose of providing coordinated TA to employers, State VR agencies, and workforce system partner agencies in State and local areas to facilitate job placement of individuals with disabilities; and
- working with Federal partners to determine the feasibility and desirability of developing a labor market exchange system designed specifically for matching job seekers with disabilities to employer needs in order to provide a shared resource to connect employers to a larger pool of qualified individuals with disabilities.

RSA plans to continue to work with its many partners, including its workforce development partners, the [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation](#) (CSAVR) and the [National Council of State Agencies for the Blind](#) (NCSAB), [the Net](#), the [National Rehabilitation Association](#), the [National Council on Rehabilitation Education](#) (NCRE), the [U.S. Business Leadership Network](#) (USBLN), business stakeholders, industry organizations, advocacy organizations, and other stakeholders to continue to focus on addressing the needs of employers and individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment.

Links

- American Health Care Association (AHCA) – <https://www.ahcancal.org/>
- Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities Model Demonstrations (Career Pathways):
 - Georgia – <http://e3georgia.org/>
 - Kentucky – <http://kcc.ky.gov/Office-for-the-Blind/projectcase/Pages/default.aspx>
 - Nebraska – <http://vr.nebraska.gov/pathways>

- Virginia – <https://www.vadars.org/gsp>
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) – <http://www.rehabnetwork.org/>
- Government Contractors Association (GCA) – <http://www.govcontractors.org/>
- Job-Driven Training Report – https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/skills_report.pdf
- Job-Driven Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center (JD-VRTAC) – <http://www.explorevr.org/content/research-projects-explorevr>
- Maher & Maher – <http://www.mahernet.com/>
- National Association of Federal Credit Unions (NAFCU) – <https://www.nafcu.org/>
- National Council on Rehabilitation Education (NCRE) – <https://ncre.org/>
- National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) – <http://www.ncsab.org/>
- National Organization of Nurses with Disabilities (NOND) – <http://nond.org/>
- National Rehabilitation Association - <https://www.nationalrehab.org/>
- The Net – <https://www.disabledperson.com/CSAVR>
- New Editions Consulting, Inc. – <http://www.neweditions.net/>
- Presidential Memorandum—Job-Driven Training for Workers – <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/30/presidential-memorandum-job-driven-training-workers>
- Transition Work-Based Learning Model Demonstrations – <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/rsa-twblmd/index.html>.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics News Release, June 21, 2016 - <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.htm>
- U.S. Business Leadership Network (USBLN) – <http://www.usbln.org/>
- Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) – <https://www.doleta.gov/business/incentives/opptax/>
- Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) (P. L. 113-128) – <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ128/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>
- Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC) – <http://www.wintac.org/>

