

INFORMATION BRIEF #5

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELORS TALK ABOUT THE BARRIERS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

Self-employment closures for vocational rehabilitation (VR) recipients with disabilities have remained static over the last two decades. Only 1.7% of the total participants exiting in competitive integrated employment (CIE) for all VR agencies (General/Combined and Blind/Visually Impaired Agencies) were closed in self-employment during Program Years 2018 and 2019. In comparison, the percentage of VR employment outcomes in self-employment was 2.0% in FY 2003, 1.7% in FY 2005, and 1.7% in FY 2007.

In order to begin to understand what may be limiting the number of individuals exiting services in self-employment, the National Center on Self-employment, Business Ownership, and Telecommuting conducted focus groups with VR counselors. The goal was to learn what VR counselors believe are the barriers and facilitators to self-employment as well as the training needs of VR counselors. This brief presents information on barriers as reported by the participants of these focus groups. Two major themes were identified with six subthemes: funding challenges, implementation challenges, knowledge and skills challenges, system challenges, disability challenges, and perceptions of fit.

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WHO WERE THE PARTICIPANTS?

With the assistance of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), an email was sent to the State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) directors telling them of the focus group study. A link to a webpage was included with a request to disseminate it to their state agency. In addition, an announcement about the focus groups was included in the weekly CSAVR newsletter, also sent by email.

Individuals who received the email or saw the announcement in the CSAVR newsletter used a link that directed them to a secure webpage. There, they could read information on the study and consent to participate. After reading the study description, an individual could select a focus group that they wanted to join. This included: 1) VR counselors who have supported a person with disabilities in self-employment; 2) VR counselors who have received training on self-employment; 3) VR counselors from rural states; 4) VR counselors from high population states; and 5) VR managers or counselors who have a self-employment management position.

A total of 58 individuals consented to participate in the study: 27 individuals who self-identified as VR counselors who have supported a person with disabilities in self-employment; six VR counselors who had received training on self-employment; 18 VR counselors from rural states; and five VR managers or counselors who have a self-employment management position. Only two individuals selected VR counselors from high population states, and a focus group was not conducted for this group due to the small sample size. Of the 58 individuals that consented to participate, 36 VR counselors and managers participated in seven scheduled homogeneous focus groups. Table 1 provides demographic information that was submitted by 31 (86%) of the participants in the focus groups. Five participants did not respond to the email that requested demographic information.

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

Highest Level of Education	# of Participants (n=31)
Bachelors	3 (9.7%)
Masters	26 (83.9%)

Highest Level of Education	# of Participants (n=31)
Doctorate	1 (3.2%)
Did Not Respond	1 (3.2%)
Bachelors	3 (9.7%)
Job Title	# of Participants (n=31)
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor	28 (90.3%)
Manager	3 (9.7%)
Years of Experience (Range: 2 to 29 years)	# of Participants (n=31)
0-5	7 (22.6%)
6-10	7 (22.6%)
11-15	8 (25.8%)
16-20	5 (16%)
21-25	0 (0%)
26-30	2 (6.5%)
Did Not Respond	2 (6.5%)
Do you currently have individual(s) with a disability on your caseload with an employment goal of self-employment?	# of Participants (31)
YES (Range 1-9)	19 (61.3%)
NO	12 (38.7%)
Gender	# of Participants (n=31)
Female	25 (80.6%)

Gender	# of Participants (n=31)
Male	6 (19.4%)
Race	# of Participants (n=31)
African American	3 (9.7%)
Asian American	2 (6.5%)
Bi-racial	1 (3.2%)
Caucasian	25 (80.6%)
Age	# of Participants (31)
Range: (31-68)	
30-39	6 (19.4%)
40-49	10 (32.2%)
50-59	9 (29%)
60-70	6 (19.4%)

HOW WERE THE FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED?

Zoom Video Conferencing was used to conduct the focus groups. The participants were sent an email with suggested dates and times, and they could select their preferences. Participant time preferences were used to schedule the focus group meetings, and seven homogeneous groups were scheduled. Each Zoom focus group was scheduled for one hour using semi-structured interview questions that can be found in Table 2. Participants had the option of joining on their computers with audio only or by telephone. A technology specialist was available to assist participants with managing the technology including turning off the video if needed to protect participant confidentiality.

TABLE 2*Focus Group Questions*

Initial Question	Probe Question(s)
What are the barriers to self-employment and business ownership for individuals with disabilities?	N/A
How can VR counselors help people with disabilities overcome the barriers to self-employment?	Does anyone have an example of a successful case study on self-employment?
	What made the person successful? Why do you think this person was successful?
In your experiences, what factors support self-employment for individuals with disabilities?	Does your state have policies that support self-employment? If yes, can you describe the policies?
	What other factors other than policies support self-employment in your state?
What information do VR counselors need on self-employment for individuals with disabilities?	N/A
What preparation did you have to assist people with disabilities achieve self-employment as their employment outcome?	What type of training have you had on self-employment since becoming a VR counselor?
	What was good about this training? What would you improve?
What recommendations do you have on how to design self-employment training for VR counselors?	How do you prefer to get new information such as fact sheets, face-to-face training, webcasts/webinars, etc.?

	What is your preference for who provides the information?
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HOW WAS THE INFORMATION ANALYZED?

Audio recordings from each of the seven focus groups were transcribed word for word using a professional transcription service. These transcripts were the data for analysis using NVivo 12 software. NVivo is a software program used for qualitative and mixed-methods research. NVivo helps organize, analyze and visualize unstructured information by providing tools for classifying, sorting and arranging data in ways that enable the identification of themes and patterns. Specifically, in this example the software was used for the analysis of the text from the focus groups.

WHAT THEMES AND PATTERNS WERE FOUND IN THE FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTS ON THE BARRIERS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT?

Findings from the analysis suggest a number of factors that interact to serve as barriers to self-employment. Two major themes were common among participants: 1) structural barriers and 2) feasibility barriers to self-employment. Six subthemes were identified under those main themes which described the data relative to the primary research question. These were: funding challenges, implementation challenges, knowledge and skills challenges, system challenges, disability challenges, and perceptions of fit as seen in Figure 1.

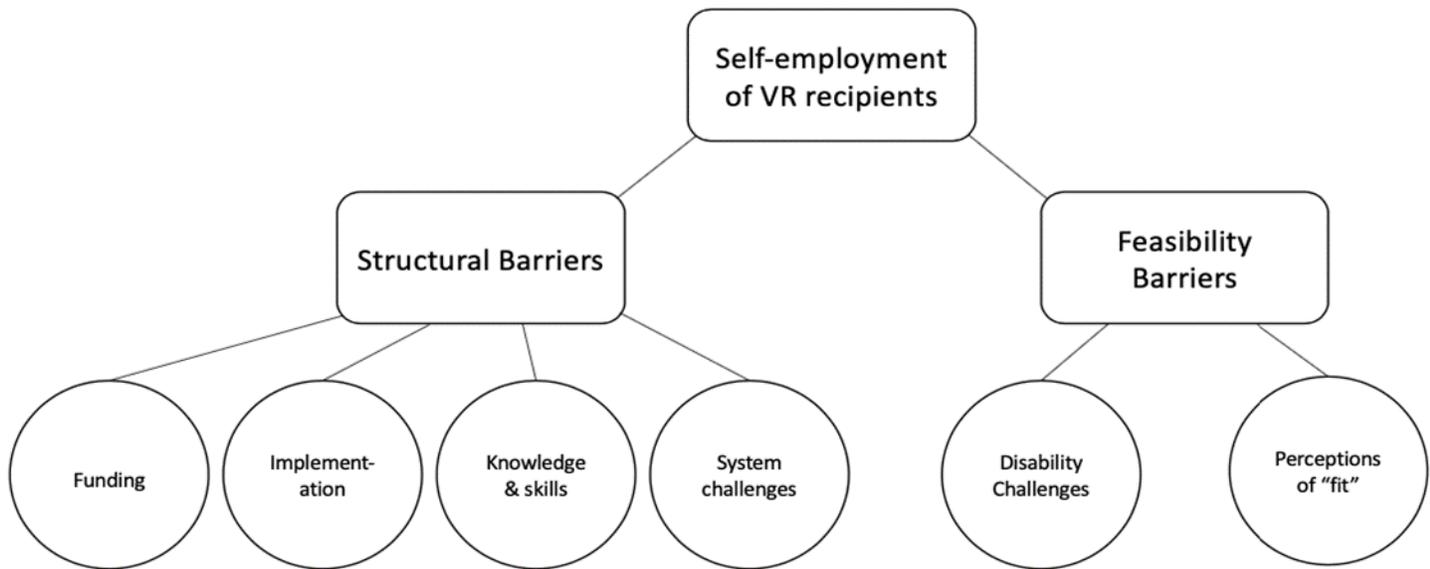


Figure 1: *Themes and Subthemes Identified from the Focus Groups*

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings show that barriers to self-employment are complex and intersect with one another to constrain the self-employment of individuals with disabilities. Participants expressed that assembling a cohesive set of supports was often daunting and sometimes the reason to exclude self-employment as a viable option altogether. However, despite the multiple and complex barriers highlighted as the focus of this study, participants did not depict these barriers as insurmountable. Many participants also shared low expectations about the viability of self-employment for their clients, and an overall hesitation from their colleagues to consider self-employment as an option given the unfamiliarity and intensity of the self-employment process as defined by policy.

Participants described a structural barrier related to the VR system itself. These included limitations in resources and services, and limitations in policies that provide regulation and guidance of self-employment in practice. Participants identified VR counselors' knowledge and skills as another structural barrier. Noted deficits in knowledge and skills served as barriers to self-employment in a number of ways. Most prominently, the lack

of experience undertaking the process previously served as a deterrent to VR counselors' consideration of self-employment as a viable option for individuals.

Participants in these focus groups shared that self-employment was more commonly accepted and implemented in rural communities, but also provided additional insight that many of the same rural barriers to traditional employment (e.g., transportation, limited business network opportunities) also impacted rural self-employment. Likewise, participants discussed the importance of community resources like small business development centers as essential to facilitating self-employment. Participants also shared perspectives that limited cross-training of staff and models of collaboration stymied the impact of potential partnerships between VR and community small business supports.

One perspective among participants was that individuals with disabilities misunderstood what the self-employment process entailed and wanted to "just sit back and collect the money" because they "no longer want to work for someone else." Many of these participants described clients who eventually decided that self-employment was not for them, or in some cases, described counselors actively dissuading clients from pursuing self-employment goals due to the length and intensity of the process. Other participants shared the insight that colleagues were hesitant to broach self-employment as an option because of the nature of the process, the time involved, and the complexity of many of the tasks that some counselors may feel are beyond the capacity of their clients.

WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF THIS INFORMATION?

There are several key limitations when interpreting findings from these focus groups. First, the purpose of this paper was to examine VR counselors' perceptions of barriers to self-employment. The study sample was limited to VR counselors and thus only provides the perspective of a single stakeholder group. It is likely that individuals with disabilities and other stakeholder groups have different perspectives and likely would identify other barriers to self-employment. Second, these findings are not intended to make generalizable claims about the perspectives of all VR counselors or barriers as they affect the outcomes of VR recipients with disabilities. Further research is needed to gather information on the factors that are limiting self-employment outcomes for

individuals with disabilities. Future information briefs will present additional findings from these focus groups on the facilitators as well as training needs of VR counselors.

REFERENCES

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