

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) Self-Employment Proficiency Scale

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs provide critical support for individuals with disabilities in obtaining employment. To expand opportunities and reduce barriers for VR customers, it is essential that VR programs offer the full range of employment options, including self-employment. To be effective in offering the self-employment option, vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) must have sufficient knowledge, skills, and support.

The Center on Self-Employment, Business Ownership, and Telecommuting, developed this proficiency scale to serve as a guide for VRCs and VR management in:

1. Setting realistic expectations for VRCs who support VR customers with self-employment, given the VRC's level of proficiency, and
2. Developing a system of support for VRCs to ensure all VR customers exploring or pursuing self-employment receive quality VR services regardless of their VRC's level of proficiency.

A VRC could use this scale to self-assess their knowledge of self-employment and to identify the support they need when working with a self-employment case. A State VR agency could use the proficiency scale to evaluate whether customers pursuing self-employment have access to the appropriate level of support or if there are systemic knowledge/skills gaps that need to be addressed.

Development and Overview of the Scale

The Center developed the scale with Utah State University (USU) using a multi-step process. USU conducted a Delphi study that identified 42 knowledge and skills that a VRC needs to support self-employment. Center staff and USU researchers collapsed the 42 knowledge and skills into 24 competencies and developed a broad description of a three-level proficiency scale (novice, competent, and expert) based on the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition and the National Institute of Health's competency proficiency scale. Using the broad description of the proficiency scale, Center staff drafted descriptors that captured what is realistic for novice, competent, and expert VRCs to do when executing each competency. Finally, USU researchers conducted a survey and focus group and collaborated with the Center to finalize the scale.

The resulting scale has three levels of proficiency (Table 1) and descriptions of proficiency for all 23 competencies (Table 2) that clarify realistic expectations for a novice, competent, and expert VRC and the type of support they need with a self-employment case.

TABLE 1

Proficiency scale (broad description)

Proficiency Level	Description
Novice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>General description of knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC has basic knowledge of self-employment concepts, policies, and procedures gained through coursework. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The VRC understands and can discuss terminology, concepts, principles, and issues related to facilitating self-employment. ○ The VRC relies on rules (e.g., procedure manual, decision trees, handouts, etc.) and assistance (e.g., hands-on help from expert VRC, supervisor, business expert, etc.) to identify the important elements of a situation, decide a course of action, and facilitate self-employment. • <u>Ability to apply knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC needs assistance (hands-on help) meeting the self-employment competency. <p><u>Professional development</u>: The VRC requires a combination of coursework and on-the-job experience for continued professional development.</p>
Competent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>General description of knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC has applied experience facilitating self-employment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The VRC can identify patterns in common situations (e.g., indicators a person needs support with business feasibility, etc.) and easily decide a course of action. ○ The VRC relies on technical support (e.g., expert VRC, procedure manual, decision trees, handouts, etc.) to identify the important elements of a situation, decide a course of action, and facilitate self-employment.

Proficiency Level	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Ability to apply knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC needs guidance (technical support) meeting the self-employment competency. <p><u>Professional development</u>: The VRC requires primarily on-the-job experience plus supplemental coursework for professional development.</p>
Expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>General description of knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC has extensive, applied experience facilitating self-employment. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The VRC can identify important elements in any situation, decide a course of action, and carry out their role with implementing the action plan independently with self-employment. ○ The VRC is recognized within their organization as "a person to ask" when difficult self-employment questions arise, is a mentor to other VRCs, or is a technical expert. • <u>Ability to apply knowledge/skills</u>: The VRC independently meets the self-employment competency. The VRC may also provide other VRCs with assistance or guidance meeting the competency. • <u>Professional development</u>: The VRC continues developing knowledge and skills through on-the-job experience and supplemental coursework. The VRC may also provide professional development opportunities to rehabilitation staff.

TABLE 2

Competency-level descriptors

Competency	Novice	Competent	Expert
1. Answer Questions: The VRC responds to	The novice VRC can respond to questions with surface-level	The competent VRC can respond to questions with	The expert VRC can respond to questions with detailed

Competency	Novice	Competent	Expert
questions about the option of self-employment in a bias-free, empowering way.	information, using handouts or other materials, in a bias-free, empowering way.	detailed explanations in a bias-free, empowering way.	explanations and examples in a bias-free, empowering way.
2. Explain Self-Employment Steps: The VRC accurately explains the steps of self-employment (e.g., core steps of self-employment).	The novice VRC can accurately explain the steps of self-employment using a handout or other materials.	The competent VRC can help the VR customer identify the step they are on and answers the VR customer's questions about what to expect during each step.	The expert VRC can share applied examples during explanations.
3. Explain Free Self-Employment (SE) Services: The VRC shares information about free self-employment resources (e.g., scope of services, how to access services) relevant to the VR customer's situation.	The novice VRC can give the VR customer a description of the common free self-employment resources using a handout or other materials.	The competent VRC can explain the scope of the free services provided by each resource and explain how to initiate services with each free resource.	The expert VRC can help a VR customer identify the free resource(s) that will meet their specific needs. The expert VRC can also share tips for smoothly initiating services with each free resource.
4. Explain VR Agency SE Policies/Services: The VRC accurately explains the VR agency's self-	The novice VRC can provide a handout or other materials that describe the VR agency's self-	The competent VRC can answer general questions about the VR agency's self-employment services,	The expert VRC can explain how the VR agency's self-employment services, policies, and

Competency	Novice	Competent	Expert
employment services, policies, and procedures.	employment services, policies, and procedures.	policies, and procedures.	procedures relate to the VR customer's situation.
<p>5. Explore SE Ideas: The VRC provides encouragement and support with brainstorming self-employment ideas that align with the VR customer's strengths, interests, skills, and conditions of employment.</p>	The novice VRC provides the VR customer with encouragement to brainstorm self-employment ideas that align with the VR customer's strengths, interests, skills, and conditions of employment.	The competent VRC provides the VR customer with resources (e.g., authorizes vendor for one-on-one support, provides strategies and tools, etc.) to brainstorm self-employment ideas that align with the VR customer's strengths, interests, skills, and conditions of employment.	The expert VRC assists the VR customer with brainstorming self-employment ideas that align with the VR customer's strengths, interests, skills, and conditions of employment.
<p>6. Provide Counseling and Guidance on Idea of SE: The VRC provides counseling and guidance on the opportunities, challenges, and VR requirements of self-employment and</p>	The novice VRC can explain the opportunities, challenges, and VR requirements of self-employment by using a handout, other materials, or referring to a self-employment expert.	The competent VRC can assist a VR customer with identifying their specific opportunities and challenges.	The expert VRC can assist a VR customer with identifying potential solutions to challenges.

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assists the VR customer in identifying their specific opportunities and challenges.			
<p>7. Support Informed Choice on SE: The VRC supports a VR customer with making an informed choice about pursuing a self-employment goal.</p>	<p>The novice VRC encourages the VR customer to use the list of self-employment opportunities and challenges, as well as other information gathered, to decide if self-employment is the best fit given their strengths, interests, and conditions of employment.</p>	<p>The competent VRC helps a VR customer use the list of self-employment opportunities and challenges, as well as other information gathered, to decide if self-employment is the best fit given their strengths, interests, and conditions of employment.</p>	<p>The expert VRC helps the VR customer compare the self-employment option to other employment ideas that have been identified.</p>
<p>8. Determine SE Planning Services: The VRC identifies VR-funded and other self-employment planning services that meet a VR customer's specific needs (e.g., business consultation, SBDC, SCORE, etc.).</p>	<p>The novice VRC can use a handout or other materials to describe to a VR customer the VR-funded and other self-employment planning services (e.g., internal business experts, vendors who are</p>	<p>The competent VRC can help a VR customer identify the self-employment planning service(s) that will best meet their needs.</p>	<p>The expert VRC can help a VR customer find new or accommodate existing self-employment planning services to meet a VR customer's support needs.</p>

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	business experts, benefit planners, etc.) that are available to assist a VR customer with self-employment planning (e.g., business concept development, business feasibility, etc.)		
<p>9. Add Self-Employment Planning to Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE): The VRC develops and/or amends (as needed) an IPE that includes the needed supports for self-employment planning (i.e., business feasibility, business plan development, etc.).</p>	The novice VRC can write, and amend when needed, an IPE that includes the relevant occupational code and VR-funded self-employment planning services (e.g., business concept development, business feasibility, etc.) by using example IPEs.	The competent VRC can write, and amend when needed, an IPE that includes the relevant occupational code and VR-funded self-employment planning services (e.g., business concept development, business feasibility, etc.).	The expert VRC can write, and amend when needed, an IPE that includes a combination of VR-funded and other self-employment planning services.
<p>10. Initiate IPE SE Planning Services: The VRC initiates self-employment planning services per the IPE</p>	The novice VRC initiates and pays for VR-funded self-employment planning services (e.g.,	The competent VRC initiates and pays for VR-funded self-employment planning services and refers VR	The expert VRC supports the novice and competent VRC with initiating and paying for VR-funded

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and ensures the VR customer has necessary supports throughout business development planning.	business concept development, business feasibility, business planning).	customers to free self-employment planning services (e.g., SBDC, SCORE, etc.).	self-employment planning services and facilitating referrals for free services.
<p>11. Counsel and Guide on Self-Employment Planning: The VRC develops a working relationship with the VR customer and provides counseling and guidance throughout business concept development, business feasibility, and business planning.</p>	The novice VRC establishes a working relationship with the VR customer and monitors their progress throughout business concept development, business feasibility, and business planning.	The competent VRC provides counseling and guidance throughout each self-employment planning step.	The expert VRC provides technical support to novice and competent VRCs with counseling and guidance on self-employment planning steps.
<p>12. Maintain Communication: The VRC maintains good communication with the VR customer, vendors, and others involved in self-employment planning and service delivery.</p>	The novice VRC maintains good communication with the VR customer.	The competent VRC creates a plan for and maintains regular communication with the VR customer, vendors, and others involved in self-employment planning and service delivery.	The expert VRC provides technical support to novice and competent VRCs with maintaining good communication with self-employment goals.

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<p>13. Guide and Review Self-Employment Planning: The VRC provides guidance on completing and reviews the business concept, business feasibility, and business plan.</p>	<p>The novice VRC can use a handout or other materials to explain the VR agency's requirements for business concept development, business feasibility and business plans, including required forms (if any).</p>	<p>The competent VRC can review and determine if a business concept, business feasibility, and business plan is complete with support from a supervisor or other expert.</p>	<p>The expert VRC can review and determine if a business concept, business feasibility, and business plan are complete and provide feedback if incomplete.</p>
<p>14. Implement Self-Employment Approval Process: The VRC implements the VR agency's approval process for self-employment planning (e.g., business feasibility, business plans).</p>	<p>The novice VRC can give the VR customer a description of the VR agency's approval process for self-employment planning using a handout or other materials.</p>	<p>The competent VRC can answer general questions about the approval process and guide the VR customer through the steps of the process using a handout or other materials.</p>	<p>The expert VRC can explain how the approval process relates to the VR customer's situation, answer the VR customer's questions about the process, and determine or assist in determining approval.</p>
<p>15. Determine Start-up Supports Needed: The VRC assists the VR customer with identifying barriers</p>	<p>The novice VRC can explain the VR agency's policy for covering items and services associated with launching and</p>	<p>The competent VRC can assist a VR customer with identifying barriers to launching and operating the</p>	<p>The expert VRC can assist the VR customer with identifying options for addressing items or services the VR</p>

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and needed supports (VR-funded and others) to launch and operate the business (e.g., training, tools, equipment, business start-up expenses, etc.) and amends the IPE as needed.	operating a business.	business (e.g., reviewing business plan). The competent VRC can identify the barriers that can be addressed with VR-funding, per VR agency policy.	agency cannot cover.
16. Counsel and Guide on Financial Aspects: The VRC provides guidance and appropriate resources for financial aspects of self-employment (start-up funding, benefits planning, etc.).	The novice VRC can identify the VR customer's net profit or loss on a Profit & Loss (Income) Statement or contact a supervisor or expert for help and refer VR customers who receive public benefits to a benefits planner.	The competent VRC can identify positive or negative ending cash on a Cash Flow Statement and identify the amount of support the VR customer needs to launch the business or contact a supervisor or expert for help.	The expert VRC can help a VR customer explore revisions to the business plan, Profit & Loss Statement, and Cash Flow Statement to a create a plan for financial success.
17. Explain Stability: The VRC explains the VR agency's policy on employment stability with self-employment to the VR customer.	The novice VRC can give the VR customer a description of the VR agency's process for employment stability with self-employment.	The competent VRC can answer general questions about the process.	The expert VRC can explain the employment stability process as it relates to the VR customer's situation and answer the VR customer's questions about the process.

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<p>18. Counsel and Guide on Launch and Stability: The VRC follows-up with the VR customer and provides counseling and guidance throughout business launch and the stabilization period.</p>	<p>The novice VRC monitors the VR customer’s progress throughout business launch and the stabilization period.</p>	<p>The competent VRC monitors the VRCs progress and provides counseling and guidance throughout business launch and the stabilization period.</p>	<p>The expert VRC provides technical support to novice and competent VRCs with counseling and guidance on business launch and the stabilization period.</p>
<p>19. Define Employment Outcome: The VRC creates milestones to evaluate the business and define the employment outcome for case closure.</p>	<p>The novice VRC can help a VR customer determine their minimum personal financial requirements and financial goals. The novice VRC can also give the VR customer a handout with example milestones to use for evaluating the business and defining the employment outcome.</p>	<p>The competent VRC can use a handout with example milestones and the VR customer’s business plan or other information to help the VR customer define the employment outcome.</p>	<p>The expert VRC provides technical support to novice and competent VRCs with creating milestones to evaluate the business and define the employment outcome.</p>
<p>20. Determine Financial Stability and Document Earnings: The VRC</p>	<p>The novice VRC can identify net profit or loss on a Profit and Loss (Income)</p>	<p>The competent VRC can identify net profit or loss on a Profit and Loss (Income)</p>	<p>The expert VRC can use financial statements to identify financial stability</p>

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<p>uses the business financial statements to determine financial stability and gather documentation of self-employment earnings.</p>	<p>Statement using reference materials.</p>	<p>Statement and document self-employment earnings per the VR agency's procedures.</p>	<p>indicators (e.g., sufficient net profit, positive cash flow, etc.) and provide technical support to novice and competent VRCs with reading business financial statements and documenting self-employment earnings.</p>
<p>21. Determine Attainment of Employment Outcome: The VRC determines when the VR customer has reached the employment outcome and provides resources to support the VR customer if the business is not stable.</p>	<p>The novice VRC can find the net profit on a Profit & Loss (Income) Statement using reference materials, identify if the amount is below the employment outcome, and contact a supervisor or expert to determine next steps.</p>	<p>The competent VRC can use all business financial statements (e.g., Profit & Loss, Cash Flow, etc.) to identify when the VR customer has reached the employment outcome.</p>	<p>The expert VRC can support the VR customer with exploring options when the business is not stable.</p>
<p>22. Provide Post-Employment Services: The VRC develops a plan for post-employment services, if needed.</p>	<p>The novice VRC knows the VR agency's procedures for post-employment services with self-employment goals.</p>	<p>The competent VRC identifies, authorizes, and monitors post-employment services when needed.</p>	<p>The expert VRC provides counseling and guidance for VR customers receiving post-employment services.</p>

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<p>23. Coordinate Long-Term Supports: The VRC identifies long-term business supports and continued skill building opportunities for the VR customer after case closure.</p>	<p>The novice VRC can identify long-term business supports the VR customer needs and a plan for getting those support.</p>	<p>The competent VRC identifies areas for the VR customer to continue developing skills to support the success of the business and gets help from a supervisor or expert to identify ways for the VR customer to continue developing those skills.</p>	<p>The expert VRC coordinates with home and community-based waiver program case managers/coordinators to ensure the VR customer has all relevant waiver services in place for business supports.</p>

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