

# **Putting the Pieces Together: Job Accommodations and Employers**

*Service Delivery*

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**Abstract:**

The assistive technology specialist is an expert in the provision of assistive technology services to rehabilitation consumers. Technology specialists traditionally work closely with rehabilitation counselors, consumers, and therapists. However, they are often times not as sensitive to the needs of employers. Employers have unique needs and they appreciate speaking with rehabilitation professionals who understand the language of human resources and marketing.

It takes a multidisciplinary team within vocational rehabilitation to fulfill the needs of both the consumer and the employer. Rehabilitation counselors serve the needs of consumers by helping them determine and setup the services they need. Assistive technology specialists work directly with consumers and technology to improve their functional abilities for employment. Employer developers bridge the gap between the rehabilitation world and the employers' world to ensure the job accommodation needs of the consumer are met and the employer's concerns are addressed.

Alabama vocational rehabilitation maintains an employer database, which shows many employers return to vocational rehabilitation repeatedly for assistance in hiring employees with disabilities, and to assist them in accommodating current employees who have become disabled.

By using a multidisciplinary team with expertise in marketing, assistive technology and accommodation services, and rehabilitation counseling, we are able to link people with disabilities and employers together to implement job accommodations to create successful employment outcomes.

**Keywords:**

rehabilitation, assistive technology, job accommodations, disability, employment, placement

**Background**

The goal of vocational rehabilitation is to assist eligible people with disabilities to improve their opportunities for employment. The employment rate for people with severe disabilities in 1995 was only 26.1%.<sup>1</sup> The employment rate for people with disabilities decreased while employment for people without disabilities increased during the economic expansion of the late 1990s<sup>2</sup>. People with severe disabilities often must turn to a vocational rehabilitation counselor for assistance in finding and maintaining employment.

The counselor and consumer work with a variety of different professionals to assist with the rehabilitation process. The various service providers who work with the consumer, such as vocational evaluators, rehab teachers, therapists, interpreters, orientation and mobility specialists, and assistive technologists are well trained in providing for the needs of rehab consumers, but do not necessarily have a very good understanding of the needs of employers.

The traditional method of vocational rehabilitation does not address the concerns or needs of the employer in a timely fashion. Applicants for VR services could wait up to 60 days

before they are determined eligible. They may have to wait even longer for funding and resources before they start to receive services. Considering FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) only provides for 90 days of leave, many people lose their jobs long before they start receiving services.

Employers have a business, company, or organization to run, and work must get done. When hiring an employee with a disability, the employer has concerns, such as safety, absenteeism, insurance costs, costs of job accommodations or restructuring, impact on other employees, previous bad experiences, and their concern that the person can actually do the work.<sup>3</sup> Employers also have concerns when they have a current employee who has become disabled. Common employer concerns with employees who are disabled include: is the disability covered by the ADA, what are the legal obligations under the ADA, should accommodations be provided if the employee's disability is not covered under the ADA, and how will accommodating an employee affect co-workers.

## **Method**

There are several important pieces that must be brought together to effectively assist employees with disabilities in maintaining their jobs.

The first piece is to have trained rehabilitation professionals available to provide services. As in many agencies, vocational rehabilitation in Alabama uses a multidisciplinary organizational team, which includes employment developers, assistive technologists, and rehabilitation counselors who work with employers and employees with disabilities to identify and address accommodations needs. The second piece is to provide services in a timely fashion. The goal is to treat both the person with the disability and the employer as a consumer of services.

The rehabilitation counselor fills the traditional role of case management, providing information, resources, counseling and guidance. Counselors work closely with consumers to coordinate the services necessary to assist them in finding and maintaining employment. These services may include: vocational evaluation, education or training, interpreter services, and purchasing assistive technology and equipment.

The assistive technology specialist works directly with the consumer and their co-workers or supervisor to evaluate and recommend technology to improve their functional abilities and/or modify the work environment.

The employer development coordinator assists consumers with job readiness training and job seeking skills. They also work directly with companies providing assistance with disability management issues, such as consultations, disability awareness training, consulting on ADA and other issues, job analysis, as well as placing qualified people with disabilities in available jobs. The employer development coordinator bridges the gap between the rehabilitation world and the employers' world to assist consumers with job placement and retention services.

Timeliness is a major problem when providing services to employers. Often, either the employee or the employer have waited until the last minute to begin to address the situation. The goal in a job retention case where the employee is in immediate danger of losing their job is that one of the team members be on the job site within 3 business days.

Vocational rehabilitation in Alabama has formalized job retention services in a program called RAVE, Retaining A Valued Employee. This program has a dual focus; first to assist workers with disabilities in retaining their employment, and second to assist employers in retaining their trained and experienced employees whose jobs are in jeopardy due to disability.<sup>4</sup>

## **Results**

Using the RAVE approach, vocational rehabilitation has developed a close partnership with many employers in Alabama and has assisted them in accommodating and retaining employees.

For the 12 month period from the start of the third quarter in 2004 to the end of second quarter 2005 (July 1 – June 30), there were 74 employer consultations concerning retaining a worker with a disability. Of those consultations, 48 employees retained employment in their position. This is an employment retention rate of approximately 65%. The employees who were not able to retain their positions received assistance in finding another position within their organization, or finding work with a new employer.

Vocational rehabilitation has maintained a very close relationship with one large employer located in the Birmingham area by providing many formal and informal services. During a 3 year test period, 129 employees with disabilities received job accommodation assistance. Of those employees, 87 were able to continue working in their current job. Employees who were not able to retain employment in their current position were provided with vocational testing, training, and job placement services as needed.

Since the inception of this program, there has been approximately a two-thirds retention rate for employees with disabilities who are referred for job accommodation services.

## **Discussion**

The system that has evolved in Alabama has been effective at placing people with disabilities into employment, as well as assisting those already employed in acquiring the accommodations they need to maintain employment or be eligible for promotion. The system treats both the consumer and the employer as a customer, providing both with services to meet the needs of both parties.

The RAVE program approach has allowed vocational rehabilitation to build a partnership with employers that encourages them to seek help with their disability management issues and in providing job accommodations. Many companies that participate in this program are also more willing to hire and work with vocational rehabilitation to accommodate new employees with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

A multidisciplinary team, which includes expertise in marketing, assistive technology services, and rehabilitation counseling that works with people with disabilities and employers together to implement job accommodations in a timely fashion benefits both parties and creates successful employment outcomes.

Research is needed on how to further bring businesses into the rehabilitation process and to determine which services will encourage them to repeatedly hire people with disabilities. A survey is needed of small, medium, and large organizations in the fields of consumer and business services, manufacturing, government, education, and health care to determine what types of services would be useful to them in hiring people with severe disabilities.

Additionally further study is needed to compare the long term efficacy of assisting employees with disabilities maintain their existing employment versus consumers in the standard vocational rehabilitation process who are finding new jobs. A comparison of the cost and time necessary to provide services between people who are trying to retain employment and people who are seeking employment would also help in determining if a RAVE style program is worth implementing on a national level.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoddard, S. et al. "Chartbook on Work and Disability." 1998. Page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Stapleton, David et al. "Has the Employment Rate of People with Disabilities Declined?" Policy Brief. December 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Siewert, Sally. "A Study of Employers Perceived Needs and Attitudes in Region IV". 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services RAVE Manual. January 2002.

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