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Developing Collaborative Relationships to Enhance Self-Employment Services for People with Disabilities

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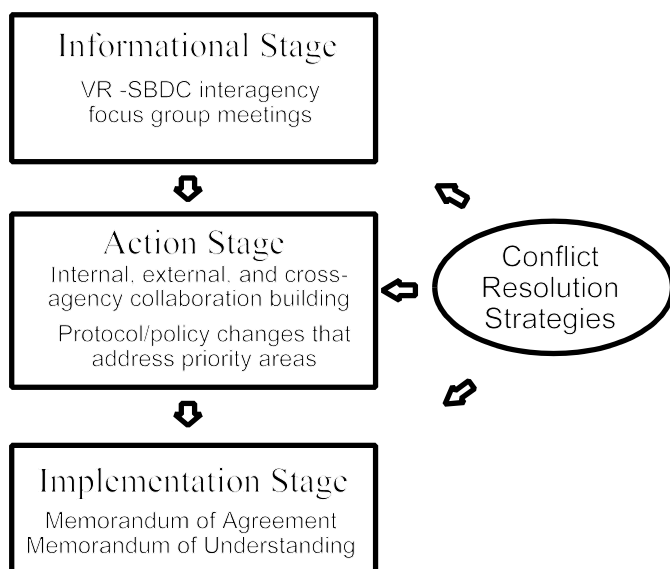
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Developing Collaborative Relationships to Enhance Self-Employment Services for People with Disabilities

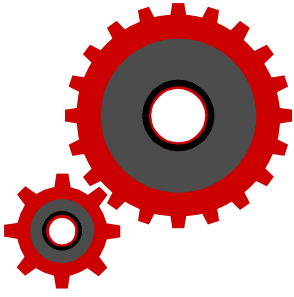
RTC: Rural researchers surveyed 571 U.S. Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) to learn about linkages between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and SBDCs that could enhance self-employment outcomes for people with disabilities. 346 of 527 deliverable surveys were returned for a 64% response rate. The resulting data show a positive relationship between the presence of informal and/or formal agreements and SBDCs' experience providing self-employment services for people with disabilities. VR-SBDC coordination could expand the outcomes of both agencies, reduce fragmentation between agencies, and capitalize on the strengths of each program.

The primary recommendation from the Linkages Survey is that SBDCs and VR agencies develop interagency agreements. Successful collaboration begins with agency commitment, trust building, and involvement of all relevant stakeholders. By following the recommended steps to collaboration, agencies can expect to learn from one another in terms of business development and disability issues to more effectively meet the needs of people with disabilities in self-employment. Perhaps the most important component of successful collaboration is full representation of those who will be affected (Axner & Berkowitz, 2002; Melaville & Blank, 1991), including agency, program, and front-line staff; and people with disabilities who have received or are receiving self-employment services. Broad-based representation adds legitimacy and relevance to the decision making process.

Path to SBDC/VR Collaboration



We recommend three steps to building SBDC/VR collaborations. The **informational stage** includes focus group meetings in which self-employment stakeholders describe their roles in the process, including the services offered, reporting requirements, performance indicators, and gaps in services. Focus group comments are the foundation for the **action stage** where interagency discussions focus on internal and external roles that may improve the continuum of self-employment services for people with disabilities. Discussion includes identification of agency roles and responsibilities and development of internal protocol or policy changes to legitimize interagency decisions. The final **implementation stage** is a written interagency Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding (MOA/MOU) that describes the role of each in the collaborative process.



Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration starts with trust building and involvement of relevant players. Focus groups lay the foundation for this development or learning stage. A focus group facilitator objectively records and transcribes focus group comments for distribution and discussion.

Phase 1: Focus Groups

Focus groups are a forum in which stakeholders share information about their agencies and identify how future agency coordination may develop. Focus groups should include a broad base of agency personnel who represent the scope and types of services provided at each agency. The following questions provide a framework for focus group discussion:

1. What do you know about each other's programs and services?
2. If you've worked together professionally, how did you learn about the other's agency?
3. What services does each agency provide?
4. For SBDC stakeholders: Including accessibility considerations, what would be required for you to work effectively with people with disabilities?
5. What will facilitate the relationship between a client with disabilities and the Small Business Development Center stakeholder?
6. What do you see as the "consumer's role?"
7. Do you encounter "turfism" in the process of providing services to people with disabilities?
8. If formal or informal interagency collaboration is requested of stakeholders (across the two major entities) what policies and/or procedures could facilitate this?
9. From the SBDC perspective: Prior to VR making a referral, what should be done to prepare the client for SBDC services?
10. From the SBDC perspective: What assistance do you need to effectively work with a person with disabilities (in terms of training, technical assistance, or support)?
11. From the VR perspective: What do you need from the SBDC to facilitate coordination of services and optimal client support?



Phase 2: Building Interagency Collaboration

The focus group facilitator organizes discussion comments into emerging issues or themes. Focus group discussions are recorded and transcribed so that key personnel can prioritize next steps and begin to assimilate the information presented. The following steps can help set the stage for continued interagency discussions.

- Step 1: Record all focus group discussions and highlight relevant or emerging themes.
- Step 2: Distribute focus group transcriptions so stakeholders can confirm content for completeness and accuracy.
- Step 3: Organize focus group transcript according to major topics and produce a short report with most important information.
- Step 4: Circulate report to additional agency personnel for comment, additional ideas, or pertinent discussion topics.
- Step 5: Prioritize specific areas to address in future interagency discussions. Identify internal and external agency roles that facilitate self-employment services for people with disabilities.
- Step 6: Confirm internal and external agency priorities.
- Step 7: Using priority areas as the basis for discussion, conduct interagency meetings to identify roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- Step 8: Write action plans specifying realistic time-lines and responsible parties to begin concrete development of protocol/policy changes that address priority areas.
- Step 9: To address issues of legitimacy, circulate protocol/policy strategies for internal feedback.
- Step 10: Continue Steps 6, 7, and 8 until interagency strategy areas have adequate support, address the needs of both agencies, and ultimately meet the needs of people with disabilities.
- Step 11: Formalize protocol/policy within agency procedures to establish new processes.
- Step 12: Develop a Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding
- Step 13: Review new strategies to determine if intended outcomes and processes are working within the VR/SBDC systems.
- Step 14: Conduct periodic interagency discussions to address any agency concerns and to work on other possible areas for collaboration.



Phase 3: Formalized Agreements

When agreements or collaboration have been established, agencies may wish to formalize the understanding in a binding document, such as a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) or a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

MOA A memorandum of agreement defines general conditions of agreement between two or more parties. In this type of agreement, what one party does depends on what the other party does (e.g. one part agrees to do X if the other party completes Y).

MOU A memorandum of understanding defines an understanding between two or more parties. This type of agreement defines what each party plans to do. However, each party's actions are independent of those of the other party.

As the term "memorandum" implies, the MOA or MOU is a brief document – a simply-written, legally binding agreement between two or more parties. The document usually defines the purpose, scope (area of the agreement), understandings and agreements. It has an effective date, and is signed by the parties involved.

**+++ Over time, building trust may promote new opportunities for +++
discussion, coordination, and growth**

References

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