Why it is Imperative Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies Keep Excellent Employees
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Background

Retaining quality employees is a key organizational issue in Vocational Rehabilitation (VR). Experienced employees who provide meaningful guidance, counseling, and services to VR participants are one of the most critical pieces to the VR puzzle to help individuals with disabilities be successful. State VR agencies across the nation indicate there is constant employee turnover. The impact of this turnover is so severe that some agencies have moved the conversation away from retention (keeping employees) to recruitment (finding new employees to fill vacancies). We refuse to accept high employee attrition as a normal state for Vocational Rehabilitation.

There is a correlation between engaged, experienced employees and great participant outcomes. Participants who are constantly bounced from counselor to counselor often leave the program unsuccessfully. It is demotivating and frustrating for a participant to develop a solid rapport with their counselor only for that counselor to leave. Oftentimes, those participants are temporarily transferred to other staff to triage the case until a new counselor is hired and onboarded. That means the time and attention that a participant receives is minimal and often only when there is an urgent matter. When a new counselor is assigned, the participant must re-explain their background, abilities, strengths, limitations, and needs.

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Expected Observable and Behavioral Outcomes

The desired outcome is to increase the number of employees that stay in the organization for over 5 years and to increase the number that advance into positions that best fit their goals and strengths. In turn, this longevity and expertise that is gained will benefit our participants and their own success stories in the long run. Additionally, the cost and time it takes to interview, hire, and train new employees on a consistent basis is expected to far outweigh the cost it takes to implement creative strategies to keep quality employees.

However, there are hurdles that make it very challenging to keep those employees, and a core issue is pay. Unfortunately, salary and benefits often fall outside VR management's capabilities to change. Therefore, VR management understands that we need to "think outside the box" and initiate creative ways to acknowledge and engage valuable employees and keep them within the organization.

We need to know not only why great employees leave but also why they stay. Employees who love their jobs and remain with the organization have greater success and therefore, good outcomes. Knowing why they stay allows management to build on those reasons to retain others. We believe that it is the mission and purpose of the job that keeps them here. Often, the simplest true essence is that these employees want to help people succeed. This is a return to the purest foundation of beliefs and values that keeps them invested in their work.

To continue providing excellent service to participants and see them succeed, it is critical for VR to explore and implement innovative initiatives to keep good employees and serve as a model employer. As with most organizations, good employees will in turn provide good services and increase chances for success for the end-users.

Two Retention Tools

Vocational Rehabilitation agencies should start their retention work by incorporating two tools into their business model: employee engagement surveys and stay interviews.

Employee engagement surveys measure the degree to which employees feel valued in their organization. Tracking employee engagement is important to determine whether or not employees are happy and how long they'll stay with the organization. Employee engagement surveys measure employees' commitment, motivation, sense of purpose, and passion for their work and organization. They should be administered not only once but on an ongoing basis (i.e., annually), with the first one gathering baseline data and future surveys measuring progress. Surveys should be conducted anonymously and results transparently distributed to everyone. Additionally, management must also provide action steps they will take as a result of the survey, and then progress updates provided throughout the year.

Stay interviews are conducted to help managers understand why employees stay with the organization and what might cause them to leave. In an effective stay interview, managers ask questions in a conversational manner. This approach is more personal than an engagement survey and gets at a particular employee's motivation rather than

the group as a whole. According to Indeed.com, there are several benefits to conducting stay interviews, including that these interviews can:

- Show your employees that you care about their thoughts and feelings regarding work
- Help you build trust with your employees
- Increase the communication between you and your employees
- Allow for a mutual conversation between you and an employee regarding their current stance on work
- Give you valuable information needed to make positive changes within the workplace
- Provide you with patterns and data related to your employee turnover rates

Recommendations

Using results gathered from Wisconsin's 2018 State Stay Interview results and Minnesota's Annual Engagement Survey, as well as through anecdotal evidence provided by the agencies represented in this paper, we have identified six components that agencies should investigate and implement to retain their great employees and increase their successful participant outcomes.

1. Restoration of the Counselor Role

Most counselors enter the field to help and support individuals with disabilities in reaching their fullest potential and quality of life. Taking it a step further, counselors who seek employment in the public Vocational Rehabilitation system do so because they believe in the mission and purpose of helping people succeed and giving back to the community. This is a return to the purest foundation of beliefs and values that keeps them invested in their work.

What counselors often find surprising, especially if they are just coming out of school, is the amount of time they spend NOT doing the specific things they were trained to do (i.e., helping individuals directly). Instead, counselors feel they spend the majority of their time completing paperwork and performing data entry tasks.

State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies need to identify strategies that maximize the time counselors spend directly helping people succeed and decrease the amount of time spent doing data entry. This in turn will lead to higher job satisfaction and retention. This can be accomplished by providing sufficient support staff, reducing administrative burdens wherever possible (e.g. internal forms, processes, and approval layers), and enhancing case management systems to reduce the time spent entering data.

2. Transparent and Ongoing Communication and Engagement

Increasing transparent communication between levels of staff is critical to keeping quality employees. One organizational key value should be "Communicate Early and Often", and all staff should be held accountable to that value, including and especially senior leadership. Regular, transparent communication between field staff and central

management will assist in addressing the often-prevalent nature of "Central Office/ Management vs. Field Staff".

Employees want to know what projects, initiatives, and changes are occurring and most importantly, the "why" behind them. Involving field staff at the front end also encourages a feedback loop that benefits everyone. It encourages field staff participation and provides opportunities for management to hear about the true happenings at the level of implementation. Both employees and management get to understand each other's viewpoints and interact directly with one another, modeling teamwork. Additionally, management should directly ask staff what they find beneficial, such as what information they want to see shared via data dashboards (e.g., statewide or individual performance). Honest conversation, reviewing the "why", and challenging the process fosters a growth mindset is critical to success; it encourages both flexibility and adaptability that can become pervasive across staff levels and in turn, transfers to participants.

As part of these conversations, look for every opportunity to incorporate and review the agency's values and mission and align it with staff's values. Some examples include reviewing the mission/vision at each meeting, sharing personal stories of when and how values align, and applying new policies through the lens of the mission/vision.

Wisconsin's 2018 Stay Interviews found that one of the main reasons staff stayed was the support system they developed with their colleagues. VR management can create and foster opportunities for colleagues to develop and nurture their relationships with one another, both professionally and personally. In turn, this will also highlight the humanistic factor of staff, alleviating possible misconceptions about one another based solely on one's title (e.g., Administrator or Director).

For statewide teams and committees, impose term limits so that other staff can have opportunities to participate. This allows a greater number of staff to communicate with management and engage in leadership exercises, thus spreading the wealth of knowledge to more employees and increasing their abilities to help participants even more.

When offering and creating local or statewide trainings, tap into the agency's greatest resource - field staff. When field staff's colleagues develop and deliver training, the immense impact is twofold: the material is far more effective and relatable, and field staff leading the training initiative are engaging in leadership opportunities.

3. Flexible Work Environments

Flexible schedules inherently convey a message of professional trust, and employees appreciate options for flexibility which in turn fosters a greater work-life balance. This includes having alternative schedules, such as a four-day work week, and/or working remotely full- or part-time. State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies that do not have flexible work schedule options will experience an increased number of staff who seek out other employers who provide this option.

For those agencies instituting flexible work environments, field staff need to understand their expectations and responsibilities. Likewise, managers and supervisors need to have training on how to manage performance, supervise, and coach when their staff are not on site. Staff also need the tools and technology necessary to perform their work in any setting or situation.

4. Professional Development

Providing opportunities for professional development increased engagement and is an easy, low-cost way to actively show management's investment in retaining staff. Management should not only provide options for development, but also encourage staff to share their training and understanding with their colleagues as a way to boost leadership skills and continued rapport-building among employees.

Professional development opportunities fall under two categories: role-specific and training on advancement. It's important to consider how to develop staff to grow within the organization while simultaneously giving autonomy for choosing areas of growth. Agencies should remove any barriers that make it cumbersome for staff to receive training, as there are often numerous layers of approval levels and a high volume of paperwork that is required for staff to participate. Another approach is to educate and encourage staff to take advantage of easily accessible trainings, such as LinkedIn Learning, which offers industry standard trainings. By empowering staff to easily access trainings of interest to them, it removes the idea that training is considered "busy work".

Structurally, some ideas to keep quality staff include promoting staff who live outside the central office physical location to broaden the pool of applicants and provide opportunities to more staff in the organization, especially in light of the success in virtual work settings.

5. Skilled Managers and Supervisors

Every employee deserves a good manager or supervisor. We all have heard this before: employees leave managers, not organizations. Often, they leave because they are not getting the growth and development they want and need, they do not have the support and backing of their supervisor, or they are not trusted to do their work.

It is imperative that professional development is offered to not only field staff but managers and supervisors as well. Staff who come into leadership roles were often counselors themselves. It is frequently assumed that they will be good leaders because they were good counselors, but the skill set is different. Therefore, offering mentoring and leadership training to these staff is critical. It is helpful to create networking and collaborative opportunities for staff across the state in those same positions, so that they can share their expertise and provide opportunities for consultation (e.g., email distribution list solely for supervisors, etc.).

Management often falls into the trap of "management by exception". This occurs when policies are created because of one or two rare instances, and now these policies apply to everyone, leading to staff frustration. When staff experience "management by

exception", it demonstrates lack of trust. Managers are encouraged to be judicious in implementation of policies or rules that may have unintended consequences when attempting to manage a few exceptions.

Another avenue to explore is how the role of human resources factors into retaining good employees, such as the inherent "us vs. them" mentality that occurs between field staff and central office/management. This culture of institutional bias is an enormous issue that requires a long-term shift of mentality across all levels of the organization and one that has no easy solution. One idea is to have management staff visit local offices and use an "open door" policy to provide opportunities for connection, discussion, and rapport-building between levels of staff. Local activities surrounding gratitude, customer service, acknowledgement for those who demonstrated excellence, etc. will foster rapport-building.

For new employees, onboarding is a critical time to set the stage and cultivate a positive culture. When possible, the state VR director and/or other senior leadership should make every opportunity to spend time with each new employee, getting to know them and developing a relationship. When someone is in a position of power, field staff may not feel comfortable coming to that person with concerns or questions. By showing the human side, you are demonstrating approachability, trust, and respect and that someone can come to you without fear of reproach or judgement. It is important that senior leadership and upper management understand that they need to model the way.

6. Tangible and Intrinsic Rewards

Symbolically speaking, hosting awards ceremonies and re-shifting the focus to the organization's values, beliefs, and mission could also create an environment that encourage staff to stay within the organization. Working together between management and field staff to explore areas for meaningful awards could also foster collaboration and provide more meaningful recognition.

Implementing strategies to provide tangible and intrinsic rewards (e.g., passion) is also essential in fostering a work climate that encourages staff to stay. Some simple rewards that are often within management's power to grant include remote work, flexible schedules, employee recognition, and agency celebrations that highlight the mission and vision.

Possible ideas for employee recognition, whether in-person or virtually, could include highest Social Security reimbursement, cases of the year, timeliness for eligibility and IPE completions, or nominating colleagues who boost work morale. Hosting these ceremonies or events more regularly on a smaller scale may also highlight the reason why staff come to VR in the first place; it helps keep the vision and mission present on everyone's mind. It is important to remind staff that our work is transformative. It is inherent in our mission that we help others. Employee recognition reminds staff of the intrinsic emotional satisfaction that true VR stories can bring us.

Conclusion

Quality employees who provide meaningful guidance, counseling, and services to VR participants are among the VR agencies' most valuable resources. VR agencies must utilize all available tools and strategies to ensure the development and retention of these employees to ensure the best possible outcomes for their participants. Examining the reasons that existing staff stay with the agency, and identifying potential limitations of the agency, are critical first steps in developing, implementing, and fostering retention solutions.

While we recognize that external environmental challenges to retaining quality employees will always exist, including the limited ability to give raises or bonuses, there is still a tremendous amount of power that exists within the VR management's toolbox to influence employee retention. State vocational rehabilitation agencies can begin their retention work by following the six recommendations: 1) Restoration of the counselor role; 2) Transparent and ongoing communication and engagement; 3) Flexible work environments; 4) Professional development; 5) Skilled managers and supervisors; and 6) Tangible and intrinsic rewards. This will ultimately result in greater success for our participants which returns all of us to the critical mission and vision of VR.