Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) can play an important role in helping people with disabilities to find and keep jobs. VR agencies provide an array of individualized employment services, such as job coaching, job-search assistance, training, and assistive technology. However, past research has found that less than half of people who apply for VR services exit the system with jobs, and many individuals who apply for VR drop out before they receive any VR services. People may be more or less likely to experience improved employment outcomes depending on factors related to their disability, work history, motivation, or reasons for not working at the time of application.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at factors associated with getting a job and earning higher wages among a sample of VR applicants with various disabilities. They wanted to find out which factors were associated with higher rates of exiting the VR system with a job. They also wanted to find out which factors were associated with higher earnings.

Researchers at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center: Individual-Level Characteristics Related to Employment Among Individuals with Disabilities looked at data from 932 people with disabilities who applied for VR services in Ohio in 2014. As part of a larger study, the participants completed a survey, answering questions about their demographics, such as race and education level; what disabilities and limitations they experienced; their work history; how important it was to them to find work; and their reasons for not working, if they were unemployed at application. Specifically, the applicants who were not working at the time of application were asked to select from a list of reasons they had for not working, such as challenges related to their disability, lack of transportation, employers not giving them a chance, concerns about losing disability benefits, or being discouraged from working by family or friends.

The researchers examined these data along with records from the Ohio VR agency collected from 2014 to 2016 to find out how many of these applicants had exited VR with jobs, exited VR without jobs, or exited VR before receiving any services. The researchers also looked at earnings records for the same individuals to find out how much each applicant earned through employment during the study period.

The researchers found that, overall, 25% of the VR applicants exited the VR system with jobs within two years after application. Another 29% received VR services but exited before getting a job; 42% exited VR before starting services; and 5% still had active VR cases after two years. When the researchers looked at factors associated with exiting the VR system with a job, the following factors were related to employment:
Demographics: The applicants with college degrees were more likely to exit VR with jobs than the applicants with high school degrees or less. Also, race was related to employment outcomes: 30% of the white applicants exited VR with jobs, but only 14% of the black applicants and 22% of other non-white applicants did.

Disability types: The applicants who reported having chronic pain; difficulty walking, climbing stairs, dressing, or bathing; or frequent depression or anxiety had lower rates of exiting VR with a job, and higher rates of exiting without receiving any services, compared to the applicants who did not have these specific limitations. Of all the disability groups, the applicants with hearing disabilities had the highest rate of exiting with a job (26%).

Work history: The applicants who had been unemployed for longer periods of time were less likely to exit VR with jobs than the applicants who were still employed when they entered the VR system or more recently unemployed. For example, only 13% of the applicants who had been unemployed for five years or longer exited VR with jobs, and 54% of them exited without receiving services. By comparison, more than 25% of the applicants who had worked in the previous year exited VR with jobs. The applicants who reported looking for work during the month before application also had higher employment rates than those who were not actively looking.

Importance of work: The applicants who rated working as being more important to them had higher rates of exiting VR with jobs. About 26% of the applicants who said that working was very or extremely important exited with jobs, compared to 14% of those who said that working was somewhat important and only 8% of those who said that working was not at all important.

Barriers to work: Only 11% of the applicants who said that their family and friends discouraged them from working exited VR with jobs, while 58% of them exited before receiving services. Other barriers that were associated with lower employment rates included challenges related to a medical condition, feeling discouraged from past attempts to find work, and concerns about losing disability benefits.

When the researchers looked at earnings during the study period, they found similar patterns across demographics, disability, work history, importance of work, and barriers to work. Earnings were higher among applicants who were white or college educated, had hearing disabilities, had worked within a year of application, or rated work as extremely important. Earnings were lower among applicants who were not white or had less than a high school education, had mobility disabilities or chronic pain, had been unemployed five years or longer, rated work as unimportant, or had been discouraged from working by family or friends.

The authors noted that, in this study, more than half of the VR applicants reported that they currently experience chronic pain. This percentage is much higher than what has
been reported in general population surveys. In this study, the applicants with chronic pain had higher rates of dropping out of VR services than those who did not report chronic pain. The authors noted that VR counselors may want to take this factor into consideration and develop employment services tailored to the needs of this population.

The authors also noted that an individual’s motivation to find work, as well as the attitudes of family and friends, may impact the individual’s successful engagement with VR services. In this study, those who were discouraged from working by family or friends were at especially high risk of disengaging from VR. Support from family and friends, on the other hand, may assist VR clients to get the most out of VR services. VR counselors may wish to ask clients about their support networks and to involve members of the client’s social network in their service planning as appropriate.

To Learn More

Explore VR offers VR agencies easy and convenient access to a range of research, related data, and tools for planning, evaluation, and decision-making.

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Evidence-Based Practice in Vocational Rehabilitation is designed to generate knowledge and evidenced-based vocational rehabilitation practices that improve employment rates, and quality of employment for persons with disabilities.

The Repository of Employment and Vocational Recovery Resources from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities offers research-based information and resources for job seekers and employees, VR providers and administrators, employers, and family members. These include resources to help family members understand the importance of work for a loved one with a disability and to support them on their path to employment.

To Learn More About this Study

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract #GS-06F-0726Z.