Hidden Gems: Using "Agency Business Relations LMI" as Part of Your Labor Market Strategy
By RICK KUGLER

The Job-Driven Toolkits contain resources on promising and emerging job-driven practices in vocational rehabilitation (VR).

Customized Training | Employer Supports

JOB-DRIVEN TOOLKITS

Business Engagement | Labor Market Information

When discussing labor market information, or LMI, people are commonly referring to one of two kinds: traditional LMI, or real-time LMI. However, there's an additional source that vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies shouldn't overlook: the "hidden gems" of agency business relations LMI.

Traditional LMI refers to labor market statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics or a state-based repository that collects, organizes, and disseminates historical labor data, and then uses it to identify current labor needs and project upcoming labor demands.

Real-time LMI is an increasingly popular source that uses technology called "spidering," which searches the internet based on users' chosen criteria and renders current job postings related to that criteria.

In contrast, agency business relations LMI is sourced through networking and captures opportunities that may be overlooked when using the other two kinds of LMI. Let's look a bit deeper at this underused LMI source.

What do we mean by agency business relations LMI?

Agency business relations LMI is a form of business intelligence. You can think of it as a type of reconnaissance: information gathered formally or informally from your sources that are "on the ground" and connected to the business community.

This type of LMI can be collected by an agency's business relations unit, job coaches, community rehabilitation providers, VR counselors, etc., and reflects regional business conditions. In some respects, this information is qualitative in nature, but if a VR agency develops a strategy to collect and disseminate this information, it can be a valuable source of LMI.

Why do we need another source of LMI?

Traditional and real-time LMI sources contribute to both the career planning and business development processes. However, they don't complete the whole LMI picture.

Traditional LMI is collected and analyzed, but takes time to disseminate. This statistical information may be accurate, but it's not necessarily timely. In fact, it may offer a picture of the labor market that could be more than a year old. It can also lack nuance. For example, traditional LMI may indicate a national demand for an occupation, but that same demand may not exist in specific regions in your state.

Real-time LMI can be more up-to-date, but it lists current job postings, which may not equate with existing jobs. For example, we don't always know how many positions the employer is posting for. Postings for the same job may appear on multiple sites in a slightly different form, making duplication hard to avoid.

Real-time LMI also can lack details. For instance, some localities may require certifications or background checks for occupations, and these requirements may not be readily identified by an online job description. In addition, with real-time LMI, a website may display a high number of postings for a certain occupation, but does not factor in that the market is saturated with candidates.

Agency business relations LMI offers a more nuanced picture of the local workforce. It may be more timely than traditional LMI, because it can assist a job seeker in learning about employment opportunities before openings have been posted. It may also be more useable than real-time LMI, because it reflects knowledge of the workforce on the part of business relations staff or other experts on the ground.

What are some sources for agency business relations LMI?

A good place to start is collecting and organizing information from your agency's business relations staff and job developers. This may include information that they gather through developing connections in their local labor market (prospecting), qualitative information collected as part of their relationships with existing employers (e.g., is the businesses expanding or contracting?), or information from job fairs and other business networking events.

Remember, it's more than just who's hiring. Your information should include the business climate, the availability of internships or on-the-job training, and any collaboration that businesses may have with relevant community organizations (e.g., unions, community colleges, etc.).

Valuable information can also be gained from your agency's partners. Some VR agencies have developed community-based coalitions, or "collaboratives." These are made up of some combination of community rehabilitation providers, schools, other government organizations, disability service providers, and employers. They regularly meet to exchange information and learn from each other. This can offer your agency a broad look at the landscape of your local labor market.

It may take some effort to develop these groups and engender trust among the participants. Agencies that have successfully formed and maintain these partnerships find that these groups develop a cooperative identity. Their efforts pay dividends in terms of information and connections to local career opportunities.

What is the best way to develop this type of LMI for our agency?

Like any other type of information, agency business relations LMI only has value if it is accurate, relevant, and timely. It is crucial that your agency prioritizes uniformity and access so the people who need the information can get it.

Your agency may benefit from developing a business account data collection system. Some state VR agencies are tracking business relations and local labor market data using a third-party software (Salesforce, Hubspot, etc.). Others are determining if it is best to modify their existing AWARE system or other internal database.

Based on the economic landscape of your state, you will want to pursue some strategic planning to determine whether to establish a comprehensive database for statewide use, develop one more relevant to specific regions, or use some combination of the two.

Agency leadership will need to strategize about how to balance access to the system with maintaining its integrity. You'll want your business account staff to

have access to the system. However, VR counselors, rehabilitation technicians, job coaches, etc. may also benefit from the information. Developing a strategy for oversight is vital, because having too many users can compromise consistency and accuracy of data entry.

Depending on your agency's needs and the system you choose, you might designate a key staff person who will be responsible for populating and maintaining the system.

How do we make the best use of this kind of LMI?

A well-designed and well-maintained database that is user-friendly is a great resource. But value is truly created when that information can be shared with staff agency-wide, as well as clients, to inform their decision-making process.

Your agency may have some business account staff with a comprehensive perspective on the local labor market. What happens if they retire or change professions? It is crucial that you create both an expectation and a forum to communicate LMI across your agency.

A number of strategies might help with this. For example, you could send out an agency-wide newsletter or email blast that provides an LMI summary. Or you could schedule regular meetings with business development staff and their VR counselors. These exchanges help counselors understand what their local labor market looks like, and help business staff understand the talents and interests of the agency's clients in relation to local labor markets.

The Take-Away

Supplementing your usual sources of LMI with information from your staffers' connections in the community can help your counselors guide and support their clients' career goals in a way that is responsive to local labor needs. Mining the hidden gems of agency business relations LMI can yield improved outcomes for your agency and the people you serve.

Explore VR

www.exploreVR.org

UMASS BOSTON | ICI