

COMMENTARY

VR: What business are we in?

In his best selling book, *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt speaks of the unfortunate failures of industries who were unable to effectively shape their futures because they could not grasp the most basic elements of their business. According to Naisbitt, many organizations fail to ask themselves, "What business are we in?"

Although this question may appear simple to answer, one continues to hear stories of companies which made poor decisions or judgements as a result of their failure to truly understand their "business."

The colossal failure of the railroad industry in this regard remains a textbook example in the studies of graduate students preparing for managerial business careers. The railroad industry historically viewed its business as "moving goods by rail" as opposed to the more basic "transportation of goods." The failure of the railroads to recognize this basic precept gave rise to the development of new industries offering alternative means of transport. Since the Industrial Revolution in America, this story has been repeated daily by businesses who lacked the administrative vision necessary for their survival.

Shift in perception

I recently heard the example of a drilling company described in Bruce Larson's book, *Faith for the Journey*. Mr. Larson describes a meeting in which the young chief executive officer of a drill company explained to his vice presidents that his corporation was no longer going to be in the business of making drills. Rather, they were going into the business of making holes! This shift in organizational perception allowed the company to achieve more success through the very idea that holes can be made through other means such as laser



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technology. And his company tripled their sales volume in two years.

The rehabilitation industry is now facing new challenges in regard to the provision of services for persons with severe handicaps. These challenges have been influenced by three major factors:

1. increased advocacy efforts directed at fuller integration of consumers into community life;
2. increased demands for accountability and cost-efficient employment outcomes in exchange for the expenditure of public funds; and
3. increased demands to apply new program strategies which have demonstrated the employability of persons with severe disabilities in nonsegregated, less restrictive work settings.

Faced with these new challenges, we believe many nonprofit agencies responsible for vocational habilitation and rehabilitation services are examining their organizational purpose and program service formats.

Traditional rehabilitation/habilitation service agencies who narrowly define their mission as "providing sheltered employment, work activity, or adult

developmental habilitation training" run enormous risks in an industry rapidly increasing the employment industrial work models available. The transitional and supported employment philosophies and technologies evolving are indeed threatening to the very structures and operations of these facilities.

A great deal of discussion has been held and will continue to be held on the need for facilities to offer these transitional and supported work options. Some are of the opinion that a facility which has offered sheltered work will not do a good job of offering supported employment services. Others purport that only transitional and supported work models are needed and other more traditional options should be "converted."

Ends of the spectrum

If you are too far at either end of the spectrum, you run a risk. To say that a facility need only offer traditional sheltered work and work activity training is to deny the obvious success of transitional and supported employment services for many people. Yet to only offer transitional and supported employment services is to assume that limited success can be generalized and repeated for everyone.

Is there an "ideal" service system? Not all sheltered employees work eight hours a day at challenging subcontract jobs which will eventually lead to competitive employment. Nor is there an unlimited supply of employers waiting to hire persons who are severely handicapped, nor do all companies offer full-time employment or employee benefits.

At Rise, we have examined our business and have determined we are in

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As Denise is continually learning to express herself with new signs, Job Coach Mary Stack combines signing, writing, and drawing with Denise to ensure she understands what the signs mean. See story on page 3.

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the employment business. We are not a sheltered employment facility, or a supported or transitional employment agency, but an *employment* facility. We do an excellent job of providing employment services to people who are severely handicapped.

By being in the employment business, we can try new techniques and methods of employment. We can continue proven employment systems as long as they are of value to people. We can back up external employment sites with internal work. We can move internal workers into external sites if they want to try a new job. We can market our employment services which can physically occur in the customer's building or our own. We can do all these things because we provide employment services, not solely sheltered, supported, or transitional employment programs.

Whether businesses produce goods or services, they must continue to perfect their products if they hope to remain competitive in the marketplace. Perhaps it is helpful to realize the rehabilitation industry is not immune from the need to make appropriate business responses to changing consumer demands. Community-based work models may, therefore, be viewed as a new generation of programs needed for the purpose of expanding and improving opportunities for the persons we serve.

Rise delegation to Capitol

By Chester Sanders,
SES Program Participant

A delegation of Rise trainees, sheltered employees and staff members attended a mental health rally at the Minnesota State Capitol on March 3.

At the rally, Assistant Commissioner for Mental Health Allyson Ashley explained the "slow journey" mental health legislation has made in Minnesota. She explained the mental health reform bill now before the legislature and said it would provide health services in every county, 24-hour emergency services,

outpatient services, community support services, residential treatment, acute hospitalization, consultation, and regional treatment centers.

The purpose of the bill would be to set up a statewide mental health system. Ashley said that although the bill was controversial, it was written on behalf of those who have serious and persistent mental health problems.

Ashley added that while Minnesota was known nationwide for its leadership in services for persons who are handicapped, the state ranked a low 37th in the nation for providing services for those with mental illness.

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