

NVTI Podcast Series

DVOP Specialist Skills

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[Upbeat intro music plays]

NARRATOR: Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss employment challenges and other pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

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GREG: Welcome! I'm Greg Davis.

I've been a trainer with NVTI for 20 years. I have experience in training Veterans Employment and Training staff, personnel with the Departments of Labor and Defense, but the main group I work with are the DVOP and LVER (Disabled Veterans Outreach Program and Local Veterans Employment) staff.

In this episode (The DVOP Specialist Skills) we'll be talking about the important skills that a DVOP Specialist needs to develop in serving veterans.

I'm privileged to be joined by four veterans' employment and training professionals who have a collective 30 years of experience serving veterans. First, we have Timothy Rockefeller. He's a Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) who has 9 years' experience as a DVOP and 2 years' experience as an LVER who's joining us from Connecticut. Welcome, Timothy! Tell us, what was your branch of service and how long did you serve for?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, nice to meet you, Greg. I served 4 years with First Battalion Sixth Marines and deployed to South Central Afghanistan in 2004 and Fallujah Iraq in 2005.

GREG: Nice to meet you, Tim, as well. We're glad to have you on the show. We also have Paul Cortez, who has 1.5 years of experience as a DVOP. He joins us from Sparks, Nevada. Paul, tell us the same thing. Where did you serve and for how long?

PAUL: Marine Corps. 2 years. 3rd Battalion and 7th Marines.

GREG: Awesome! Thank you, Paul. Thank you for your service and thank you so much for joining us here today. We also have Joe Henle, an Employment Representative (DVOP) with 2.5 years-experience also joining us from the Reno/Sparks, Nevada area.

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GREG: Joe, what was your branch of service and how long were you in the service for?

JOE: Air Force and retired after 21 years.

GREG: Awesome! Thank you so much, Joe. And finally, we have Brent Camery, with over 20 years-experience as a DVOP (that's awesome), and he's joining us from Des Moines, Iowa.

GREG: Alright, same question for you Brent. Where did you serve and for how long?

BRENT: Yes, I spent 6 years in the US Army at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

GREG: Thank you so much, Brent. And thank you all for participating in this podcast. Personally, I'm not a veteran, but I've been working with service providers who work with veterans for over 30 years. And I love working with the DVOP and LVER staff and learning from them so I can pass that knowledge onto the next class. So, thank you all so much for your service and what you're doing in serving our nations veterans!

GREG: I want to start off by asking you, Paul and Brent. How would you characterize the role of the DVOP specialist when it comes to the different veteran populations that they work with? So, let's go ahead and have, Paul, why don't you go ahead first please.

PAUL: First of all, I would like to characterize the role of a DVOP as someone with a lot of patience and also being very strong willed. The reason being is our veterans have barriers, and getting to meet both the short and long term goals can take time. On the flip side of this, a DVOP should also be strong willed because if you just go with the flow of things the veteran might not ever meet his goals. In my experience a lot of veterans respond better with someone that can almost give them orders because that's what they know and what they're used to. Of course, not all veterans do respond better that way; it is critical to also develop a relationship and to understand what the veteran may need to meet their goals.

BRENT: Yes, I'd like to add to this. Depending on the client, the DVOP can be a variety of different roles. Sometimes, I am simply a career counselor. Other times, I act to encourage and support the veteran's desire and path. Then, there are the times I may need to make a referral outside of workforce. Likewise, my role often changes while I'm working with a veteran. Flexibility and adaptability are the keys to doing my job well.

GREG: Great, thank you so much. So, Brent, what's the initial process for assisting veterans who come into the AJC looking for help in securing employment?

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BRENT:

- Well, as of late it's been different, Greg. Our Center has been closed to the public (due to the pandemic) since April of 2020, so we can't actually assist veterans in person. The overwhelming majority of my clients are referred to me through other sources.
- I get a lot of clients through our Reemployment Services program, and referrals from other agencies such as VA Voc Rehab, county veteran affairs offices, and other supportive services.
- When I communicate with the veteran by phone or email, I assess the veteran's needs – housing, counseling, employment, etc., and then provide appropriate guidance. I encourage them and sometimes assist them in registering into our job matching system. That way, I can track them until they have what they need.

GREG: Thank you, Brent. Appreciate that. Yes, difficult situations we come in with what's going on out there. I'm going to get back with you in a moment with a follow-up question if you won't mind. So, I'm gonna go, and let me ask you, Tim. What's your experience with some of these essential or key skills that a DVOP specialist would need in order to assist veterans in meeting their employment needs? And why would you say that these skills are so essential?

TIMOTHY:

- Yeah, so, there's all sorts of skills that can improve DVOP proficiency. However, I'd argue one of the most important is the ability to meet the veteran where the veteran's at. What I mean by this is every veteran's different and they're all coming from a different place. It's truly important for us to listen to the veteran, understand what their concerns are, and prioritize which concern we can assist with in which order.
- Standard operating procedures and best practices they're definitely important, too. But it's very important we don't go on auto pilot and work with every veteran the same way. I'll give you an example. You know, a 62 year old veteran who may or not, you know, he could have been working 20/30 years. Maybe they haven't had to look for a job since before the internet was invented. We're gonna work with that veteran differently than maybe a 22 year old veteran who maybe just came back from Afghanistan and is trying to reinvent himself or herself. It's easy to get into habits, but it's really important for us to take a step back, listen more than talk and really figure out what the veteran's individual specific needs are. Then we should address their needs in order of importance. Not only does this provide a great service to the veteran by putting out the biggest fires first, but it

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also proves with action more than words that we care, we're competent, and most importantly, we have their back. Veterans often have trust issues and actions speak louder than words.

- This will hopefully get them to “buy in” to the idea of an employment plan and that provides the organizational framework to better help them get hired into a career.

GREG: That makes a lot of sense, Timothy. Thank you. Appreciate that. Okay, now back to you, Brent. What else do you do for veterans to help them get back on their feet again?

BRENT: Well, it all depends on what the veteran needs. We start with an assessment. And this includes assessing basic needs, such as food and shelter, and then move up the hierarchy of needs. I provide career guidance, help with resumes, cover letters, and interviews along with a variety of other things. I provide encouragement in their job search (now this can include training or apprenticeships) and let them know that someone cares. If I don't have an answer to a veteran's question, I can usually find someone who does.

GREG: Thank you, Brent. That's great insight. I want to open up this next question to some of our other guests, and I'm sure there is so much to add to this discussion. So, let's go to Joe. Joe, how has the DVOP specialist role changed over time based on your experience?

JOE: Due to the pandemic, many states have placed their DVOPs and LVERs in the role of helping people filing their unemployment claims. Because of this, there have been more opportunities for job development for us and building a network of employers.

GREG: Excellent. Thank you. How about you, Paul. Is there anything you would like to add of what's changed?

PAUL: Yes, Greg. Here's a short list I came up with to elaborate on:

- We're doing more referrals for basic computer skills because COVID has forced many veterans to NEED to learn instead of wanting to learn.
- We do this with YouTube, and we have our local training centers here in Reno/ Sparks.
- I'm also seeing more time for us to provide intensive services for our veterans.

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- And also, in locations where our, like, DVOPs where we don't have a LVER and they're not available, it may benefit the veteran when a DVOP is able to assist in the job search. So, like, Joe and I, we do job developments here in Reno. We have a network of employers for our clients. And we have some staffing companies as well.

GREG: Awesome. Thanks so much, Paul. So, this brings up another important question. I'm gonna direct this question to Joe and Brent. How do you all work with such a diversified population. I mean, one minute you're working with a justice-involved veteran and a homeless veteran, and then the next you're working with a veteran who has Post Traumatic Stress or Traumatic Brain Injury. What different skillsets are needed in these kinds of situations?

JOE: Greg, there are many different skills. I'll try to touch on as many as I can, but there are a lot!

- First and foremost, empathy is the key when working with the veteran because you need to try and see the veteran's situation from their point of view.
- Another essential skill is being able to start off with a complete assessment of the veteran's needs.
 - For example, you need to be able to determine if the veteran is work-ready and whether they have I9 guidance. If not, do you have a day labor network where they can earn just coin in pocket? Also, if they are not work-ready due to physical or mental issues, do they qualify for VA Unemployability or maybe a veteran's (VA) Pension?
 - Another question during the assessment is whether they have income. This includes Social Security, VA Disability, SSDI, and any income limitations tied to SSDI or Social Security income under 66.
 - For some of our justice-involved veterans, there are also some legal limitations on work to consider:
 - Are they on parole?
 - Are they a registered sex offender?
 - Are they required to attend a Veteran's Treatment court? When that happens, you wanna make sure that they prioritize their treatment court because we don't want to put them in a situation where they

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go to work and they fall out of treatment court and they go to jail or prison.

- Also, for veterans experiencing homelessness, you should assess whether or not they're enrolled with HCHV or SFVF grants (and if they qualified for the SFVF grants, they can qualify for rental assistance and down payments). Those also include HVRP grants. Co-enrollment with the AJC is something also to be considered.
- Then, also, look at potential training:
 - Do they have access to the GI Bill?
 - Do they have access to VR&E?
 - What are your local WIOA training programs you can refer them to?
 - And finally, State Vocational Rehabilitation programs.
- There are also local nonprofit resources you can use. These help us acquire bus passes, get car repairs, and haircuts and clothing.
- Even something as simple as helping veterans to establish an email account and phone number should be a part of the complete assessment.

GREG: Thanks, Joe. There's lots to consider there. That's great. Alright, what about you, Brent? What skills do you think are important?

BRENT: Well, for me, the key is to know the programs that are available in your area, the services that they provide, and how to access them. Though there may be similarities, every veteran is different, with a unique life experience. I also make a point to listen more than I speak and to make my words count.

GREG: [chuckles] Yeah, that's very important. Thank you very much, Brent. Let's have Timothy field this next question. Timothy, what are some of the most common challenges that you have seen DVOP specialists face in their roles?

TIMOTHY: Well, Greg, I'd have to say this question could be answered differently depending whether we're talking pre-COVID or post-COVID. However, the spirit of my answer will be the same. I think developing a rock-solid outreach strategy is one of the key challenges of being an effective DVOP.

- The "O" in DVOP stands for outreach, so it's imperative DVOPs develop (and more importantly maintain) an effective outreach strategy. The first step in this is



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having the right mindset about outreach and more importantly how veterans think. Let's be honest. Some veterans don't like asking for help. Think about it; in the military we are taught to be resilient hard chargers. Sick bay is only for if you're so sick you can't get out of your rack, otherwise like all the Navy Corpsmen say, you drink water, take some Motrin, and change your socks. Some veterans still have this mindset; therefore, they often don't come to us and ask for help so that means we have to go to them. We have to locate them. We have to communicate with them how we can be a tool in their toolbox towards a better career. We need to get their buy-in to work with us. A DVOP should look at him or herself as the "sheriff" of the veteran employment world and then look at any other professional organization that assists veterans as potential "deputies." And then we want to deputize them.

- This leads to step 2. DVOPs need to connect with every single agency or organization that assists veterans. We need to meet with them and explain how we can work together as a team to better assist veterans. It's important DVOPs communicate this with the spirit of outreach being a two-way street. DVOPs and other service providers are not in competition with each other; we're all part of the same team, and our mission is to help veterans to the best of our combined ability. The DVOP should communicate to these service providers how we help veterans with employment and training and the mission of the American Job Centers (or AJC). The DVOP should advocate that the outside service provider refer every single veteran they see that's seeking employment or employment related guidance to the AJC so either the DVOP or an AJC staff member can provide priority of service to help that veteran with their career goals.
- But the DVOP also has to remember (once again) that outreach is a two-way street. Not only does the DVOP need to learn about the other organization's role in assisting veterans, but they also have to know who to make the referrals to. And, you know, veterans see us that have all sorts of things that we don't assist with directly, so we need to know who to send them to. But also, actions speak louder than words, so if the DVOP sends veterans to these outside organizations, then these outside organizations will send veterans to us.
- This leads to the step 3, which is basically maintenance. In my opinion this is the most difficult part. Outreach is a marathon, not a sprint. Time flies. Sometimes we can easily become distracted with our day to day activities. Not only does the DVOP need to develop these relationships with these organizations to help veterans, but the DVOP needs to maintain these relationships. This means reaching out continually. Programs change, staff members change, people forget. All these things happen. I recommend DVOPs put outreach reminders on their calendars and use the recurrence tool of outlook to remind them to reach out

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whether in person or virtually (whatever world we're in at the time). And DVOPs should do this and touch base with these outreach partners on a quarterly basis. In this way, we can keep our outreach relationship going. This way it's a sustainable plan. And the more we refer to them the more they refer to us and all that will better help the veterans we all serve as a team.

GREG: Really good points, Timothy! Thank you. So, let's transition our conversation now to developing these skills that DVOP specialists need to better serve veterans.

GREG: I want to give all of our guests the opportunity to answer this next question. What advice would you give DVOP specialists looking to develop essential skills to improve upon or enhance them even further? Are there any resources or training opportunities available to help further develop these skills? What do you think? Let's start with Paul.

PAUL: Although others might offer similar answers, here's my advice, Greg:

- The NVTI Training courses whenever they come out. We do them here. I think they're great.
- Any of your State/Local county programs for veterans. They might have some sort of training opportunities.
- Stay up to date with what the VA is doing. That's a big thing. A lot of our guys are, you know, they're not in tune with what's going on and the VA is always changing.
- And lastly, be knowledgeable with VA.gov and E-benefits. You know it's a great tool. You know, it's changing. E-benefits is changing. There's my HealthVet. Get proficient at that because it's gonna better our clients, because a lot of them, they don't understand, they don't know how to work it.

GREG: Excellent. Thank you, Paul. Let's go with Joe next. Joe what type of trainings are available that you could recommend?

JOE: Sure, Greg. In the State of Nevada, we have what we call a Nevada Veteran's Advocate training program. It's put on by the Nevada Department of Veterans' Services.

- And some of the things it covers (and this is not all-encompassing), but it's like:
 - State benefits.
 - Entrepreneurships.
 - Understanding VA benefits.

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- And secondly, I would encourage membership with your local Veteran Service Organizations. For example: VFWs, DAV, American Legion. There's a million out there; pick one that works for you.

GREG: Really great ideas. Thank you. Let's go with Brent now. Brent, what do you think?

BRENT: Alright. Well, I would say, as much as possible, teach others in your office about veteran services, then learn from those co-workers. Our Center, for example, has a great variety of workers from diverse backgrounds. The scope of knowledge that they have here is really quite amazing.

GREG: Thank you so much, Brent. Appreciate that. And finally, Timothy. Is there anything you'd like to add that may not have been already mentioned by our other guests?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, so, you know, earlier I was talking about outreach and how important it is developing and implementing the outreach strategy. But, you know, everything is different now. The pandemic and everything. The world's basically thrown us a curveball. Outreach is tougher now. A lot of DVOPs are forced to work virtually right now. I think it's important that, you know, we can't just sit back, feel defeated, feel sorry for ourselves for getting fewer veteran referrals. We need to get creative and think of unconventional outreach techniques to continue our outreach plans to locate veterans and the service providers. I'm still trying to learn more ways to do this. It's not easy; this is a difficult transition period. But at the end of the day, at the very least, DVOPs should continue their outreach to veterans and service providers any way they can. Whether it's, if you can't do it in person, then phone calls, emails, any other way you can think to do it. We just have to get unconventional and try different techniques.

GREG: We've had some very good discussions today, gentlemen. Thank you. I think this information will really help other veteran service providers to more effectively serve and support veterans within their communities.

I want to ask the group one more thing before we end this podcast episode. Would any of you be willing to share a recent or particularly memorable success story that involved using a particular skill to help a veteran with meaningful employment? Were there any important lessons associated with your experience?

JOE: Hey, Greg. This is Joe. One of the things that we do here in the Sparks and Reno area is we work with the Washoe County Veteran's Barracks at our local jail. This program offers wrap-around services that help reduce recidivism. One veteran used these services to completely change his outlook on life. He wanted to be an electrician. He told us that coming into it. And we basically were able to help him establish housing

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and transportation. And within two weeks of being out, we got him into an electrical apprenticeship program.

PAUL: Hey, Greg. It's Paul. I wanted to share mine, too. I assisted a veteran that was incarcerated in prison for 7 years and we helped him get an apprenticeship with a local flooring company here. The reason why I wanted to share this is because he did such a great job, that his employer just actually recently gave him a car. So, he went from, you know, being in prison and then like a month later, having a really good job, good benefits, and owning a car. So, I wanted to share that!

GREG: [laughs] These are the types of success stories that we really want to have. Are there any other thoughts, observations, takeaways that you would all like to share with our audience before we end this episode?

BRENT: Yes, this is Brent. I'll share something. Just a simple phrase: Under-promise and over-deliver. If you do more than you say you will do, you will earn the veteran's trust and respect.

TIMOTHY: Yeah, I'll jump in here too, Greg. I think it's important for JVSG programs to move forward, you know, even if it's only an inch a day. The way DVOPs, LVERs, and AJC work, it's different now. So, we need to put our brains together/work as a team to figure out the best way to leverage technology to keep our mission of helping veterans with employment go forward. You know, none of us have all the answers and some of the old techniques may now be off the table. So, we just have to be open minded, try some new ideas (some will work, some won't), and just share any best practices that any of us have throughout the country, with each other in our state, and throughout all the other DVOPs in the country. Share ideas with each other.

GREG: You bet. Thank you. Timothy, Joe, Paul, and Brent. Gentlemen – it's been great speaking with all you. Thank you for all the work that you do and thanks so much for coming on our podcast.

JOE: Thanks for having us.

BRENT: Thank you.

PAUL: Thanks, Greg.

TIMOTHY: Thanks, Greg.

GREG: Thanks guys for helping out with this podcast today. And to our listening audience out there, be sure to continue the conversation on this podcast at NVTI's Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice.

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[Upbeat outro music plays]

NARRATOR: This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute, whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts.

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