

VR&E Staff Counselors vs. Contract Counselors: Comparing Veterans' Service Experiences by Type of Counselor Assigned

Bringing the
"Voice of the Customer"
into Decision-making



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Veterans Benefits Administration**

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The purpose of this report is to explore the differences in satisfaction between Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program participants who were assigned to VA staff counselors and those who were assigned to counselors under contract with the VA.*

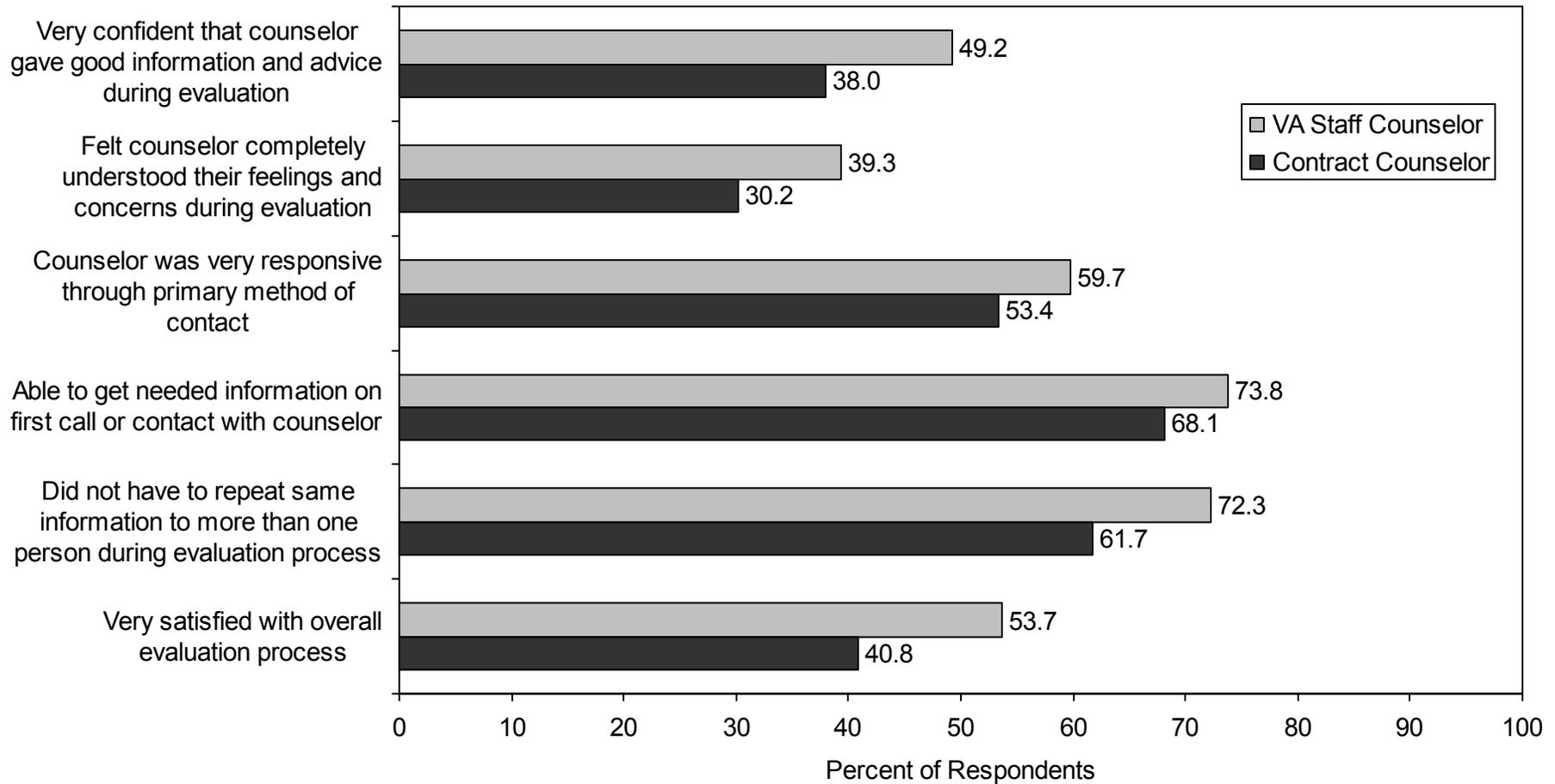
The data were taken from the 2002 “Survey of Veterans Satisfaction with the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program.” Depending on the phase of the program, between 16.0 percent and 26.8 percent of survey respondents reported being assigned to a counselor or specialist under contract with the VA rather than VA staff.

The focus of the report is on the following areas:

- Satisfaction with the *direct* counseling services provided by the counselor during each phase (evaluation, planning, rehabilitation, and job ready)
- Employment outcome and satisfaction with current job (of those who found employment)
- Overall satisfaction with the VR&E program

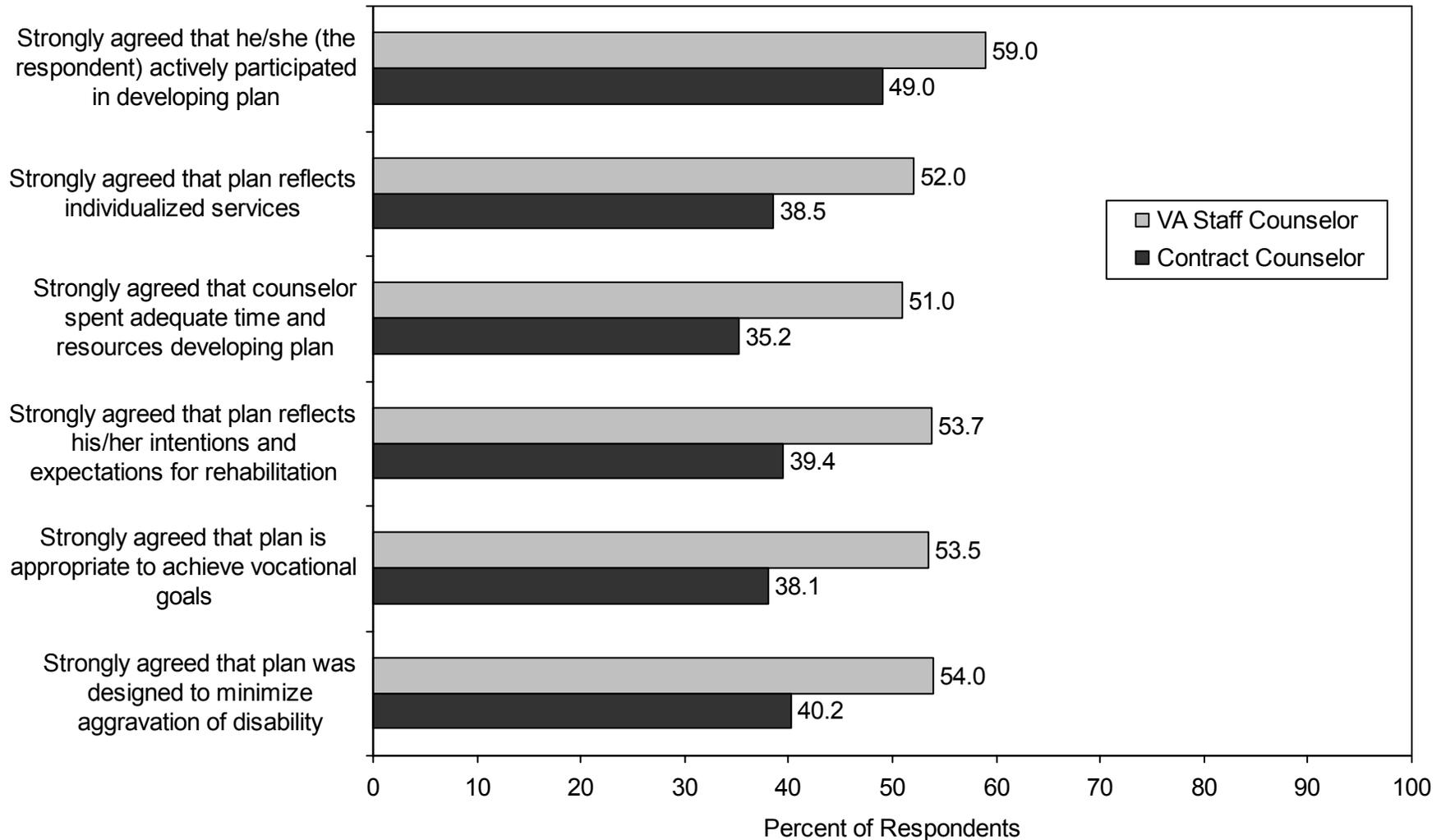
For all of the phases, all questions dealing with counselor-initiated services were examined for statistically significant differences between VA staff and contractors, and only those with significant differences are shown. The remaining charts show the significant differences which were found after examining all of the applicable questions dealing with employment outcome and satisfaction with employment, as well as overall satisfaction.

* This issue was first examined in a report released in October of 2000 using the 1999 survey data.

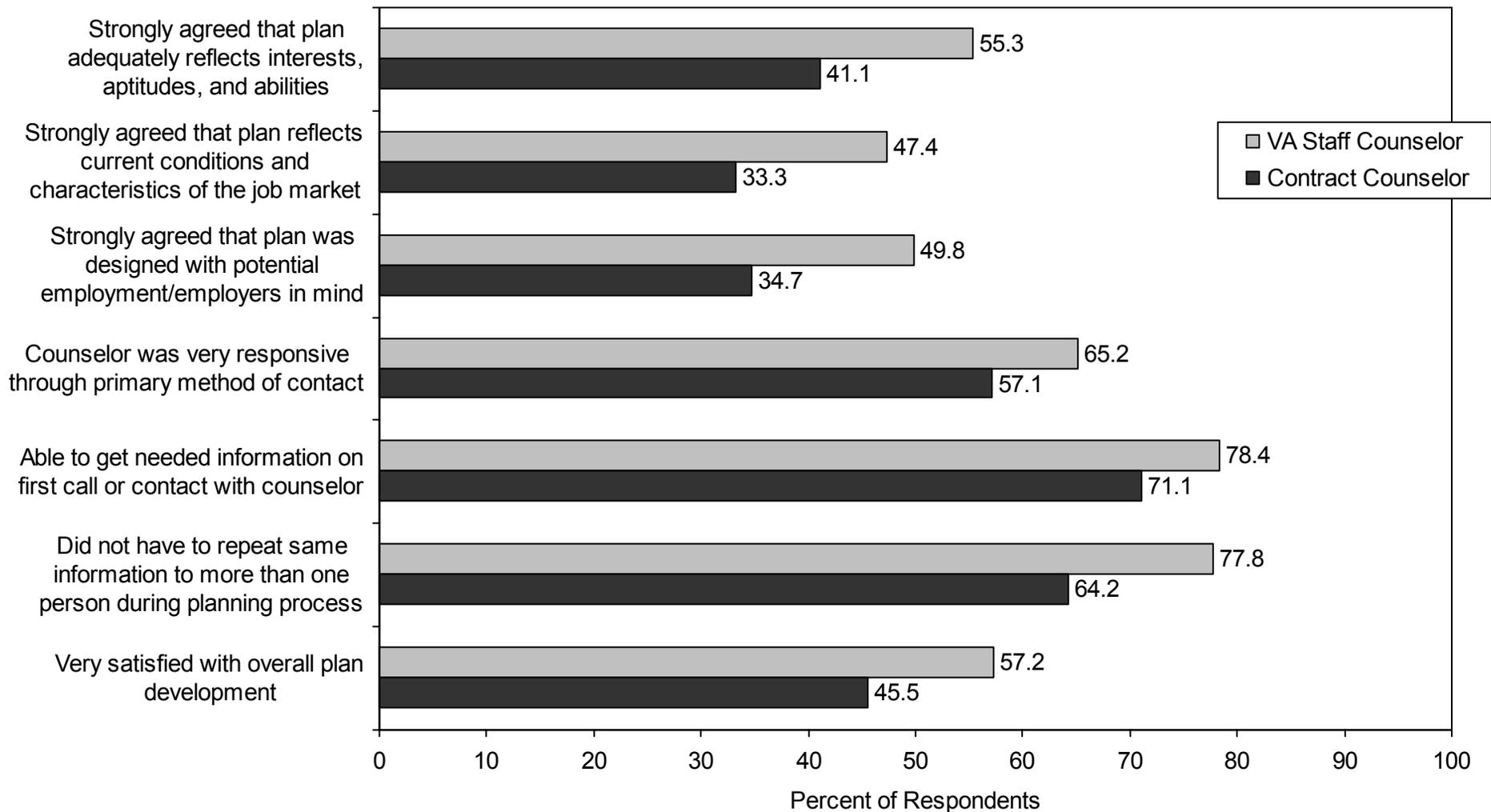


During the evaluation phase, respondents who had a VA staff counselor rated the service provided much higher than those with contract counselors in the areas shown. They were also much more likely to report being **very** satisfied with the overall evaluation process (53.7 percent) than those assigned contract counselors (40.8 percent).

Planning Phase

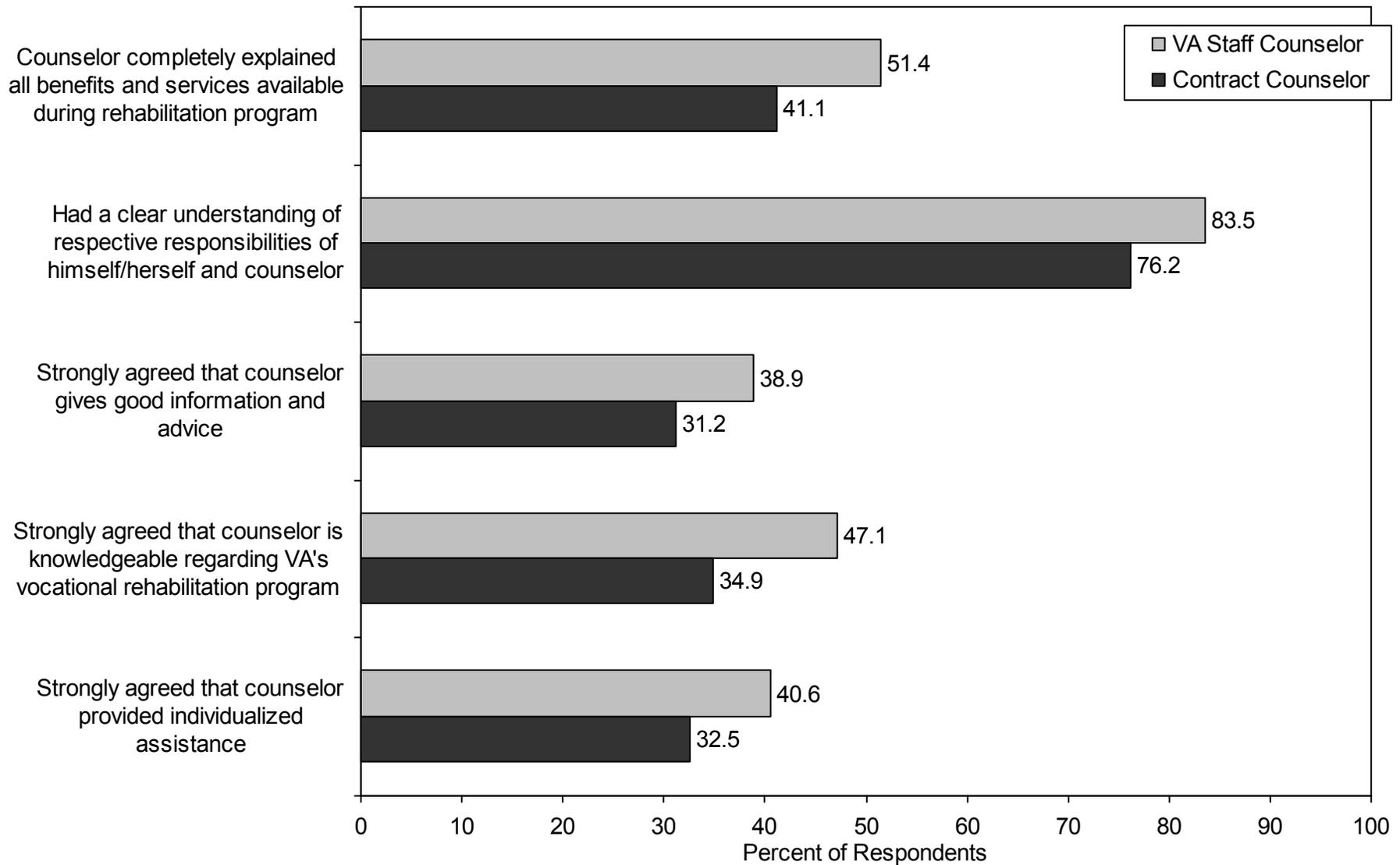


For the planning phase of the program, virtually all of the counselor-initiated services were rated much higher for VA staff counselors than for contract counselors. Over half of those with VA staff counselors gave their counselor the highest rating possible (strongly agree) for each of the items above. Those with contract counselors were much less likely to give the highest ratings. For example, 54.0 percent of those with VA staff counselors strongly agreed that the plan was designed to minimize aggravation of their disability, vs. only 40.2 percent of those with contract counselors.



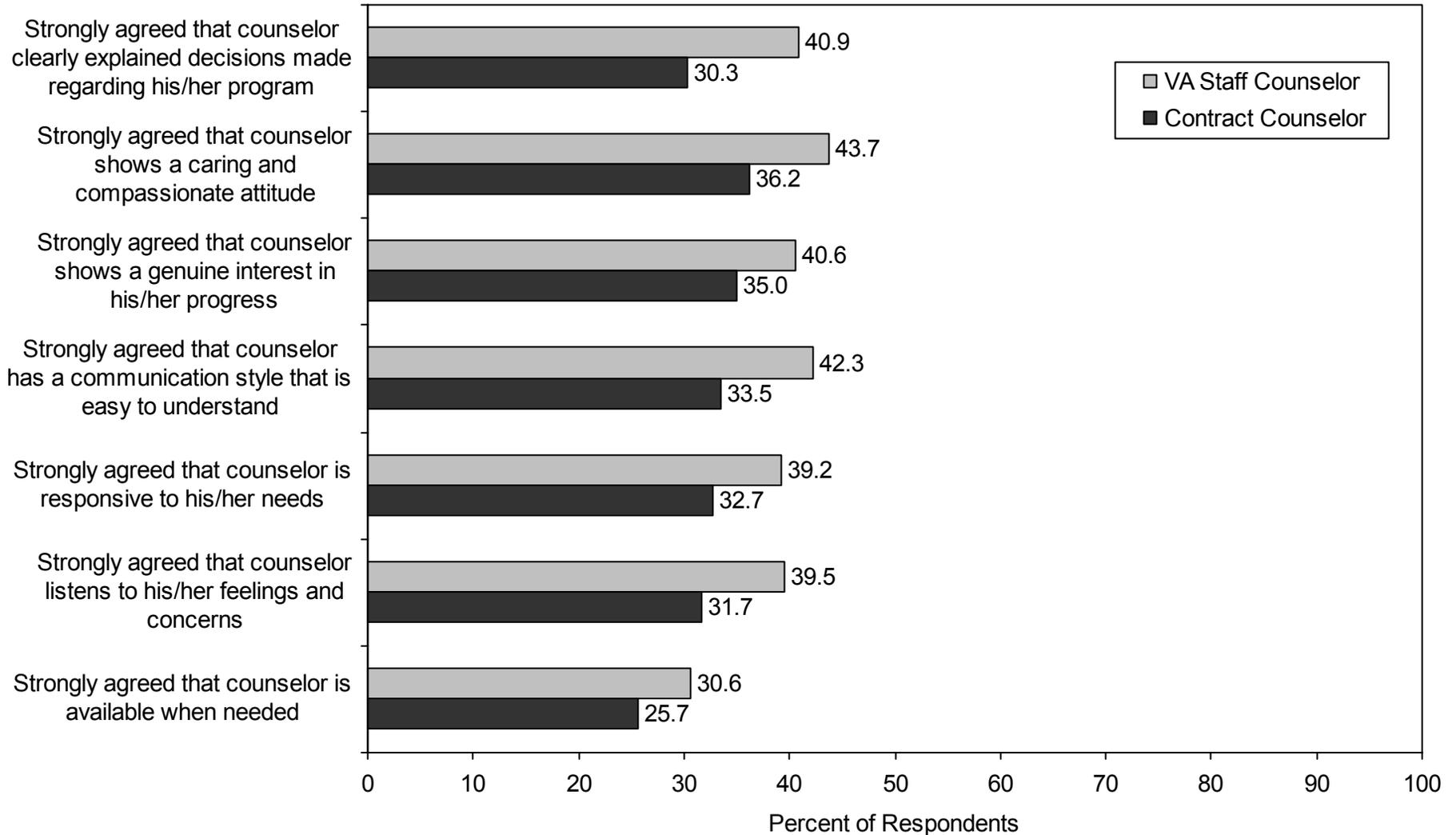
Respondents who had VA staff counselors were also more likely to be satisfied with the responsiveness of their counselor than those with contract counselors. Well over half (57.2 percent) of those with VA staff counselors were very satisfied overall with the plan development process, vs. 45.5 percent of those with contract counselors.

Rehabilitation Phase



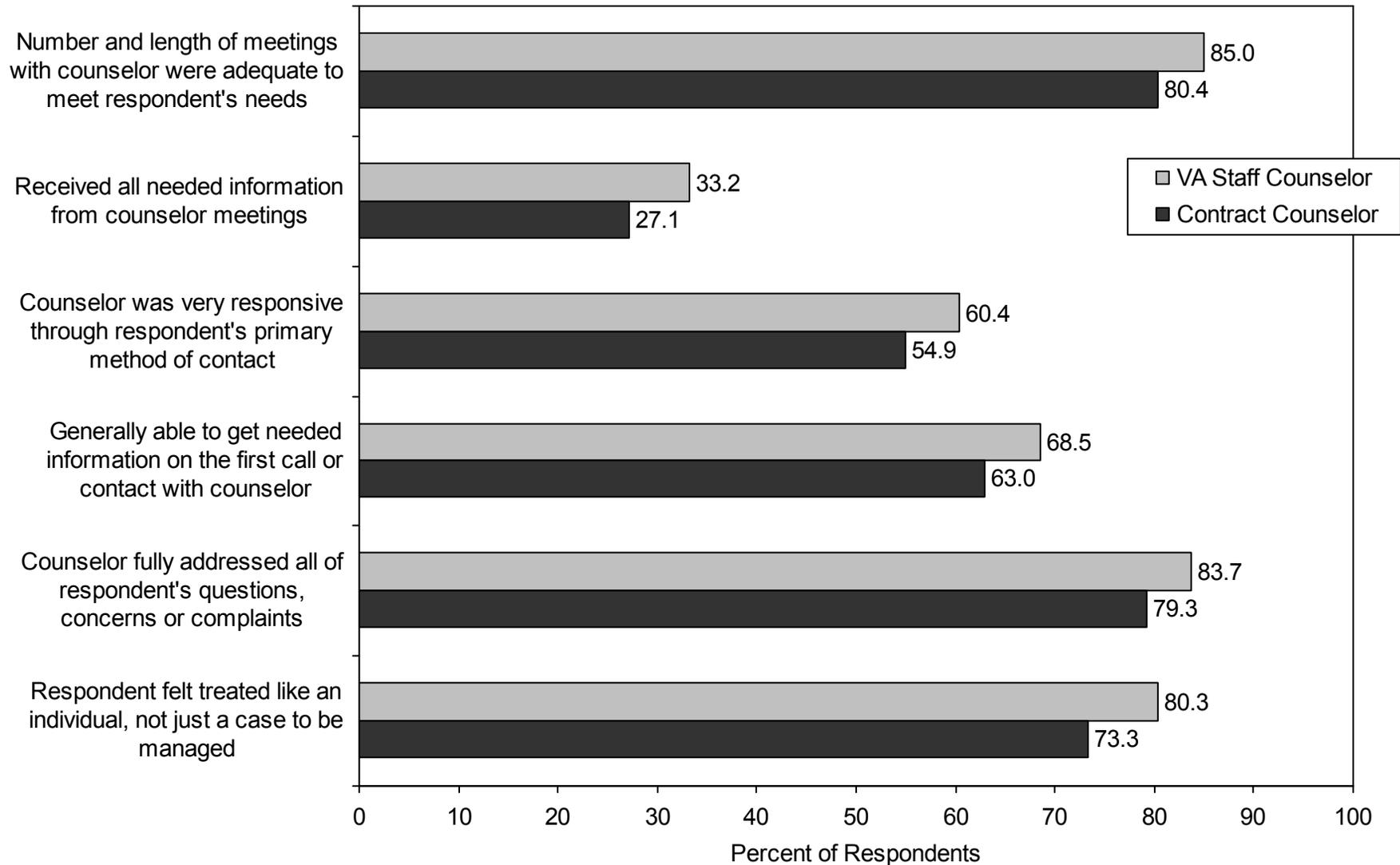
VA staff counselors also were rated higher during the rehabilitation phase of the program in many areas. In particular, staff counselors were considered to be more knowledgeable regarding the VR&E program than contract counselors (47.1 percent of those with staff counselors strongly agreed that counselor was knowledgeable, vs. only 34.9 percent of contract counselors.)

Rehabilitation Phase

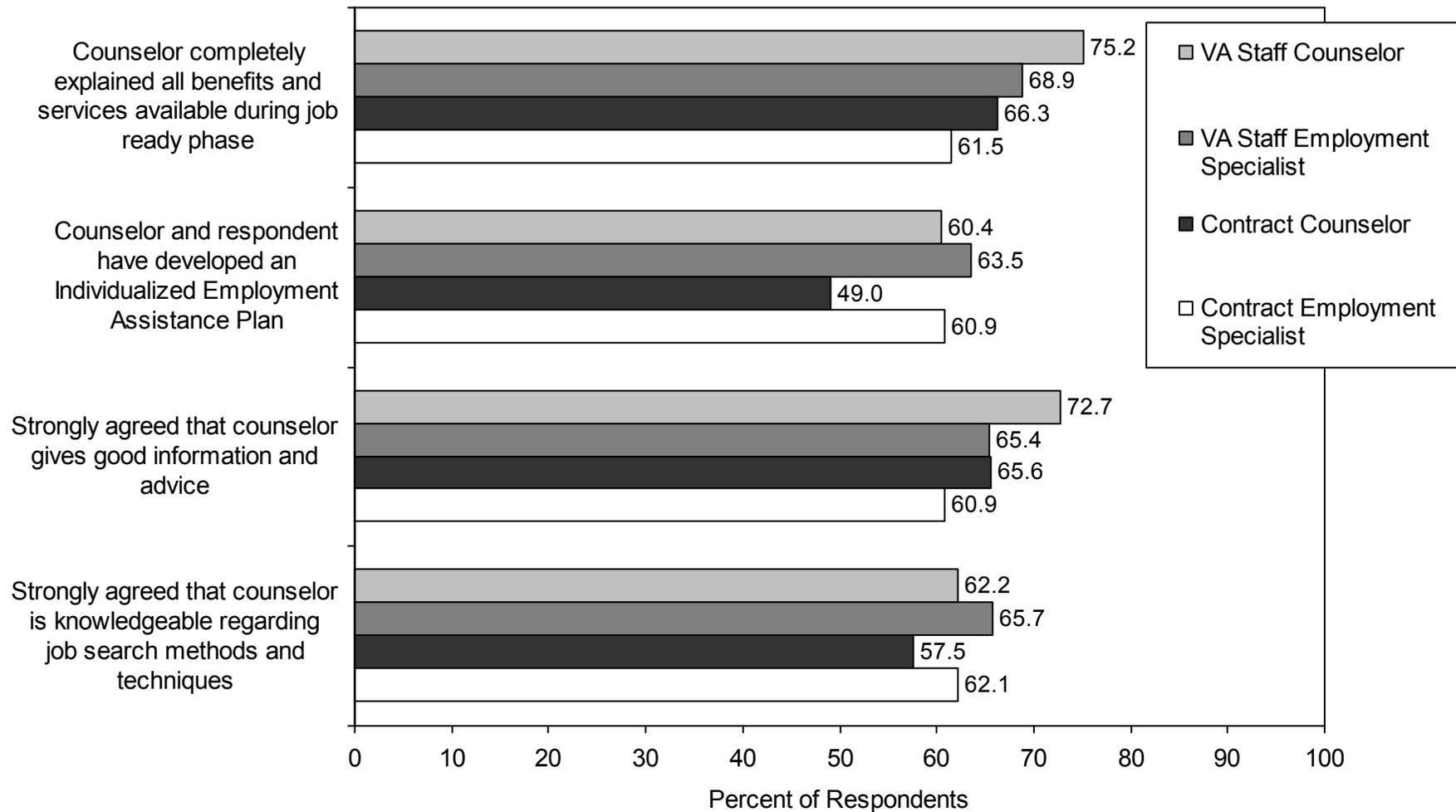


Respondents with VA staff counselors gave their counselors significantly higher ratings for almost every type of direct counseling interaction during the rehabilitation phase. Specifically, those with VA staff counselors were more likely to report that their counselor was compassionate, genuinely interested in their progress, and responsive to their needs than those with contract counselors.

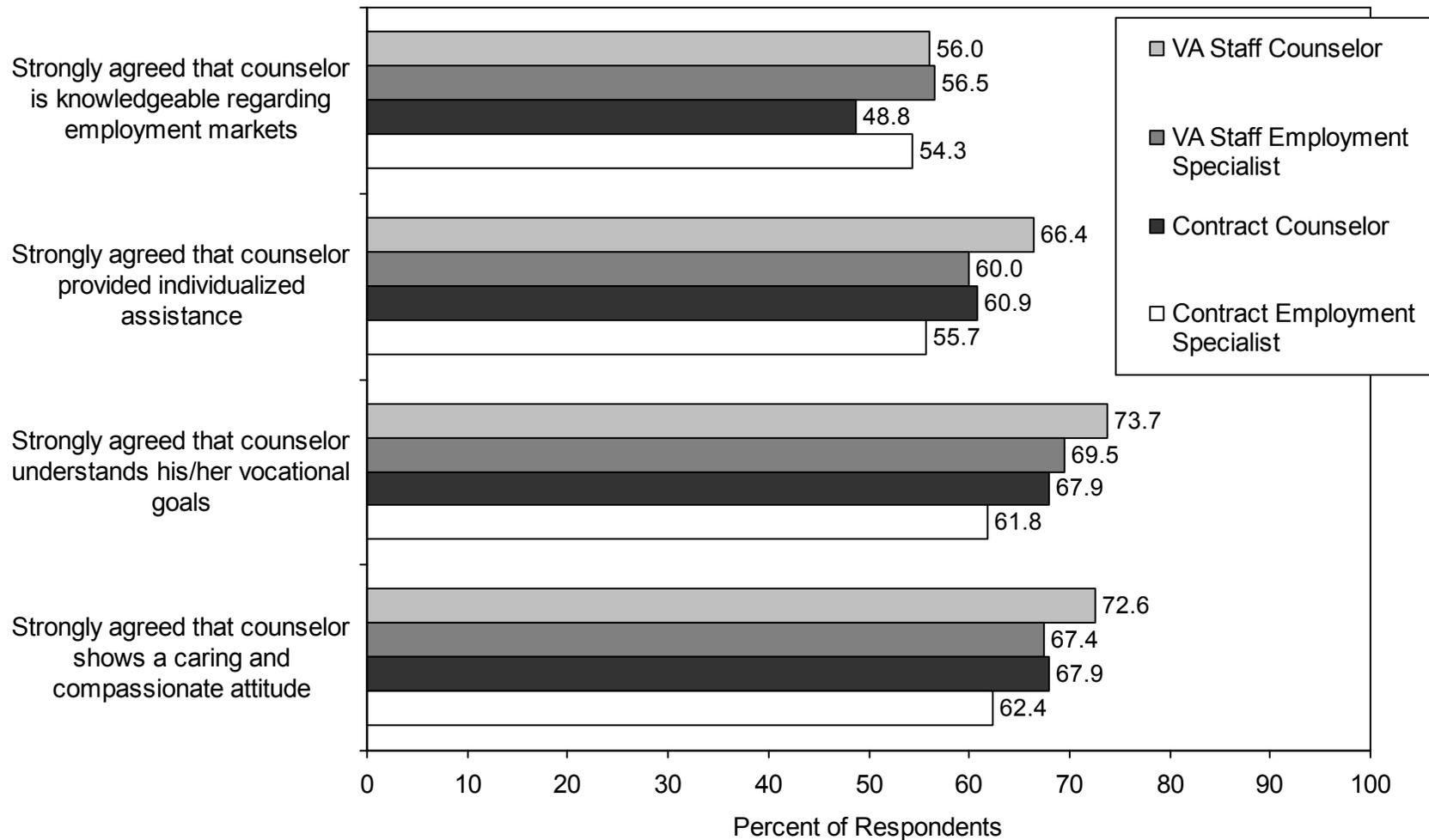
Rehabilitation Phase



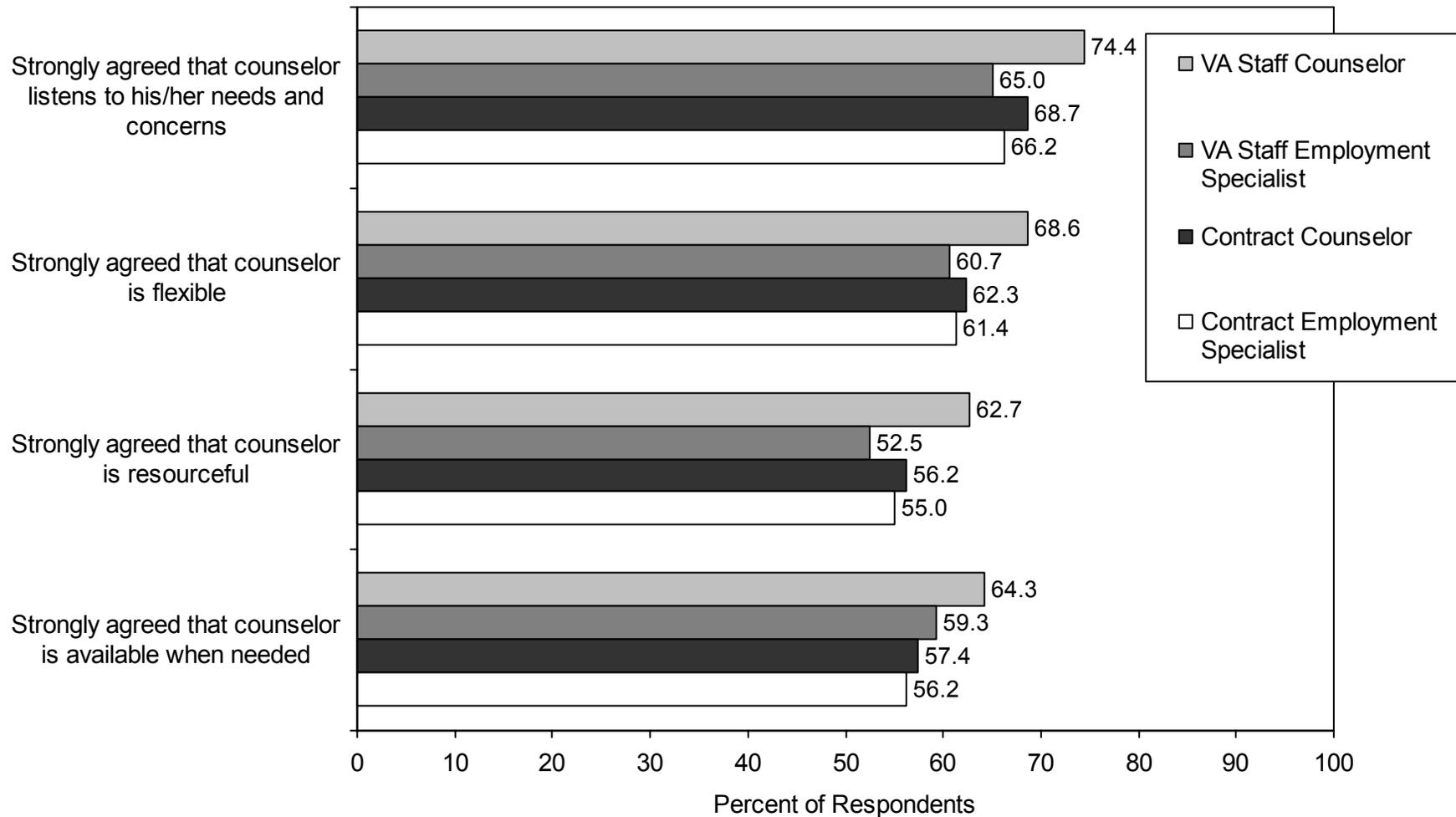
The chart above provides further examples of the superior ratings that the VA staff counselors received during the rehabilitation phase in contrast to the contract counselors. Those with VA staff counselors were more likely to consider their counselor more responsive and informative than those with contract counselors.



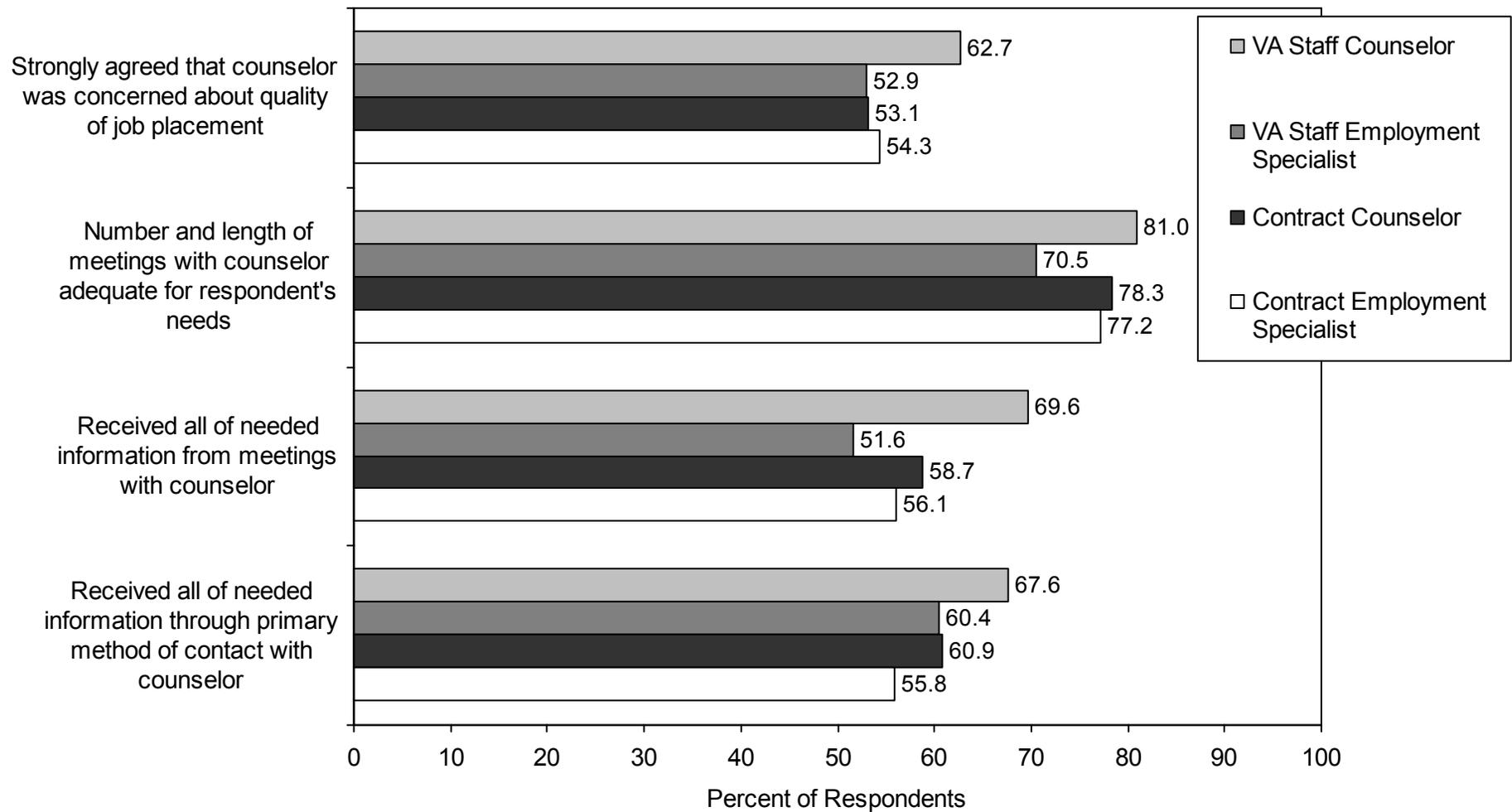
During the job ready phase, VR&E program participants are assigned to one of four possible types of counselors: staff counselors, staff employment specialists, contract counselors, and contract employment specialists. Respondents with VA staff counselors were more likely to view their counselors as informative during this phase: 75.2 percent of those with VA staff counselors said their counselor completely explained all benefits and services available vs. only 61.5 percent of contract employment specialists.



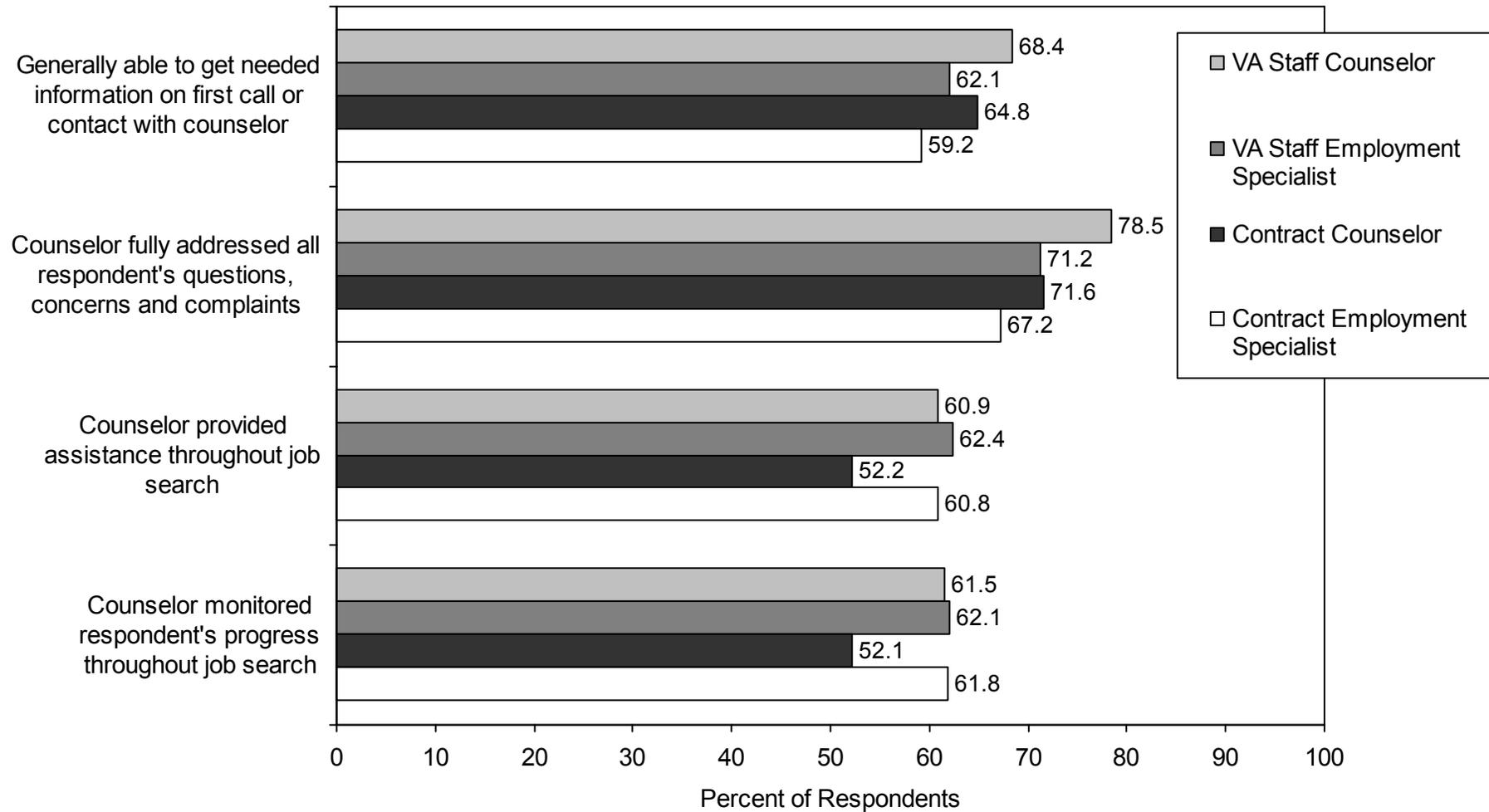
Respondents with VA staff counselors were also more likely to feel that their counselor provided individualized assistance, understood their vocational goals, and had a caring and compassionate attitude than those with any other type of counselor. Two-thirds (66.4 percent) of those with VA staff counselors strongly agreed that their counselor provided individualized assistance, compared to only 55.7 percent of those with contract employment specialists.



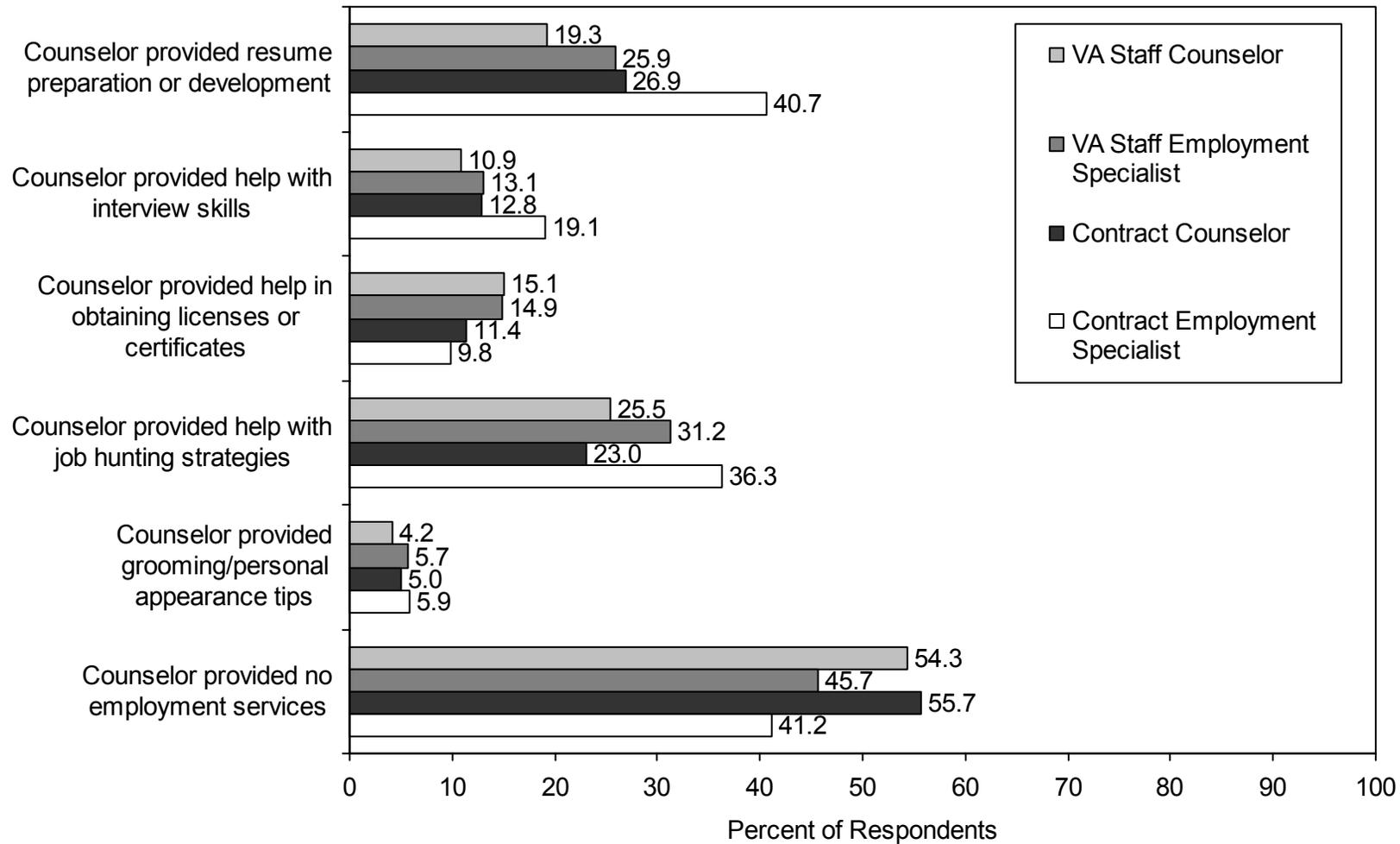
Once again, those assigned to VA staff counselors were more satisfied with their counselor than those with contract counselors or employment specialists, or even a VA staff employment specialist. Almost three in four (74.4 percent) of those with VA staff counselors strongly agreed that their counselor listens to their needs and concerns, vs. 65.0 percent of those with VA staff employment specialists.



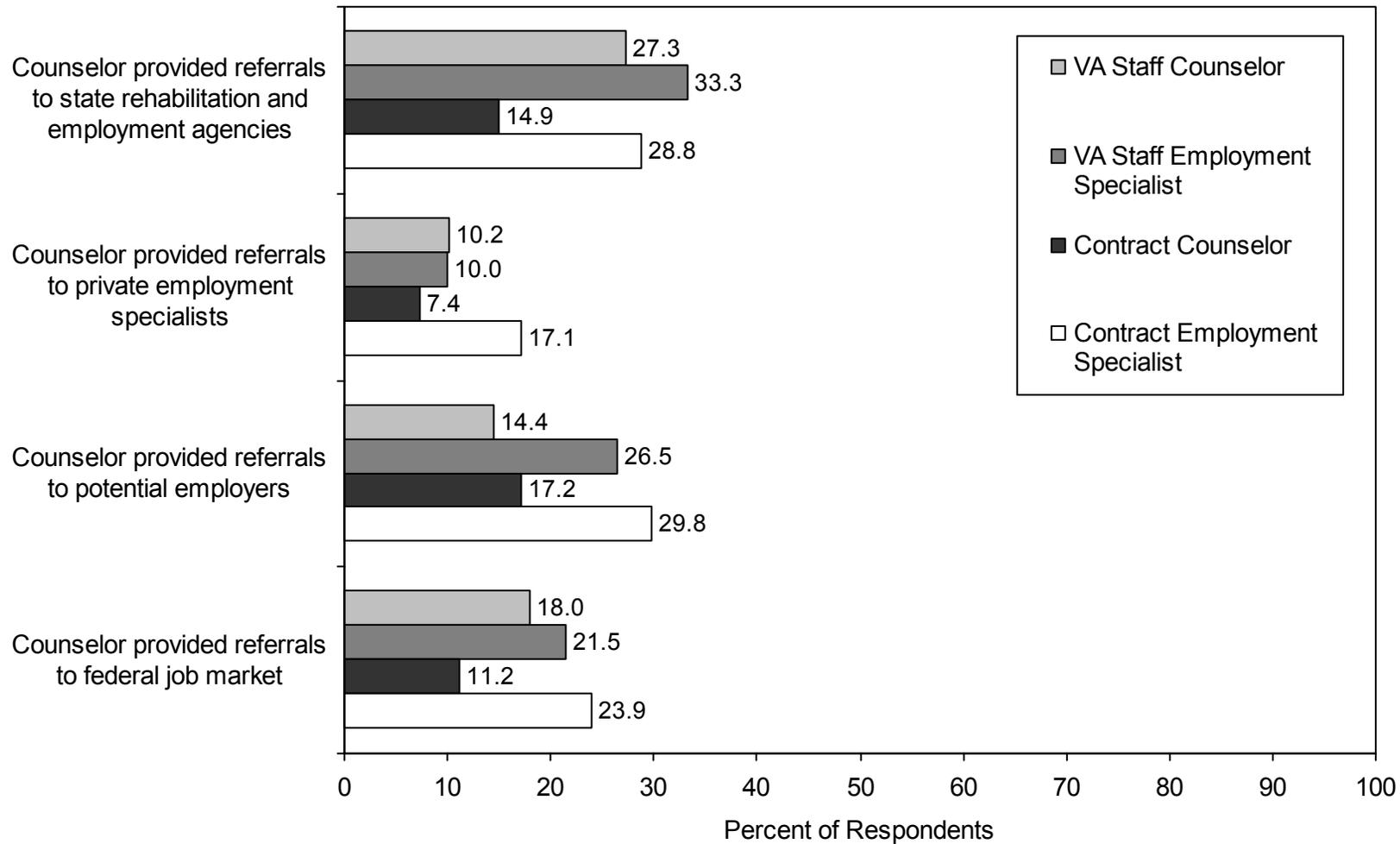
The VA staff counselors were rated highest for providing needed information during this phase; for example, 67.6 percent of those with a VA staff counselor stated that they received all of the information they needed from their primary method of contact with the counselor, compared to only 55.8 percent of those with contract employment specialists.



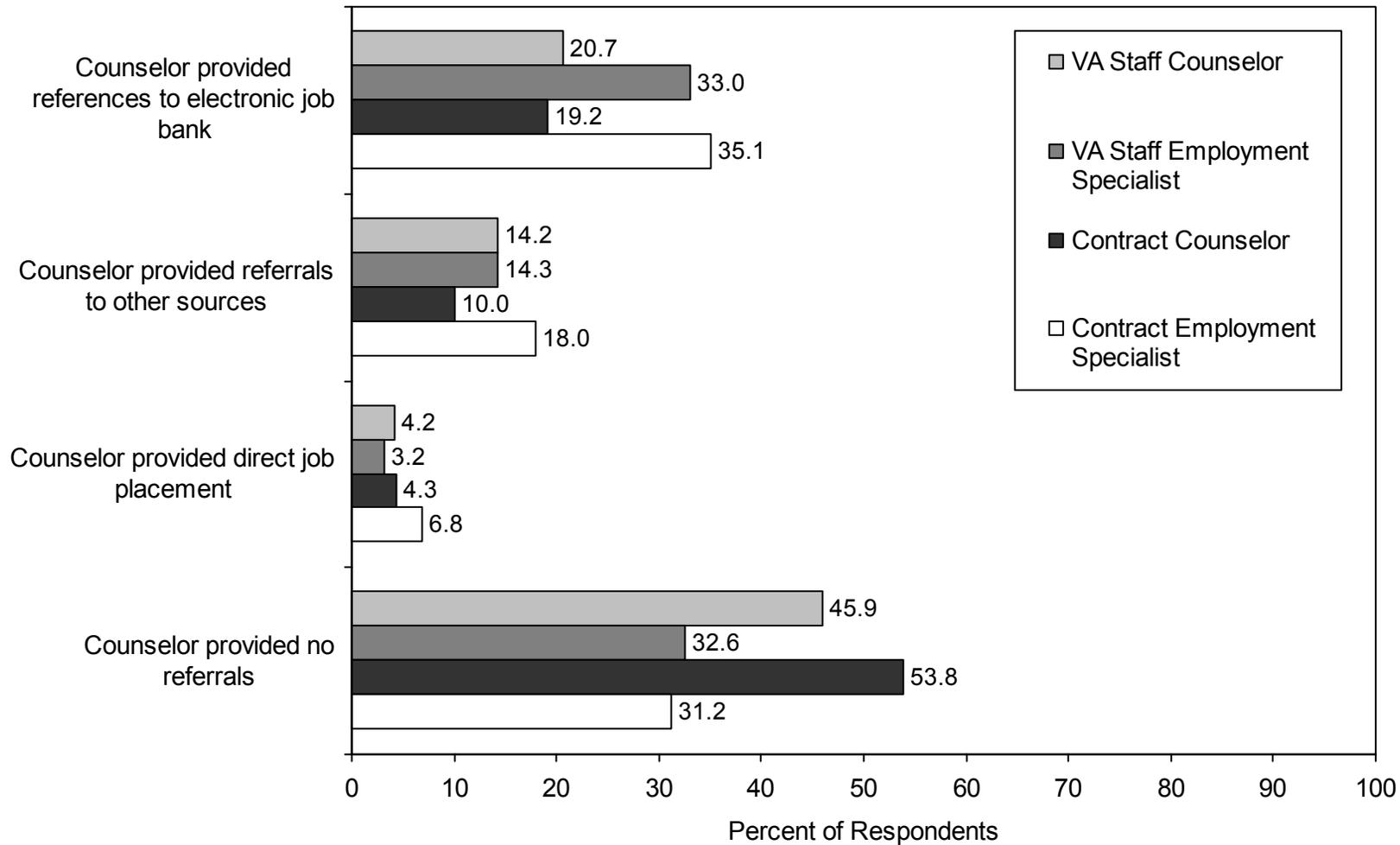
In general, the veteran's relationship with the contract employment specialist may not be as satisfactory in the quality of counseling received. However, the contract employment specialists were rated as highly as VA staff in providing assistance during the actual job search. Contract counselors were significantly less helpful than other types of counselors or specialists in the job search area.



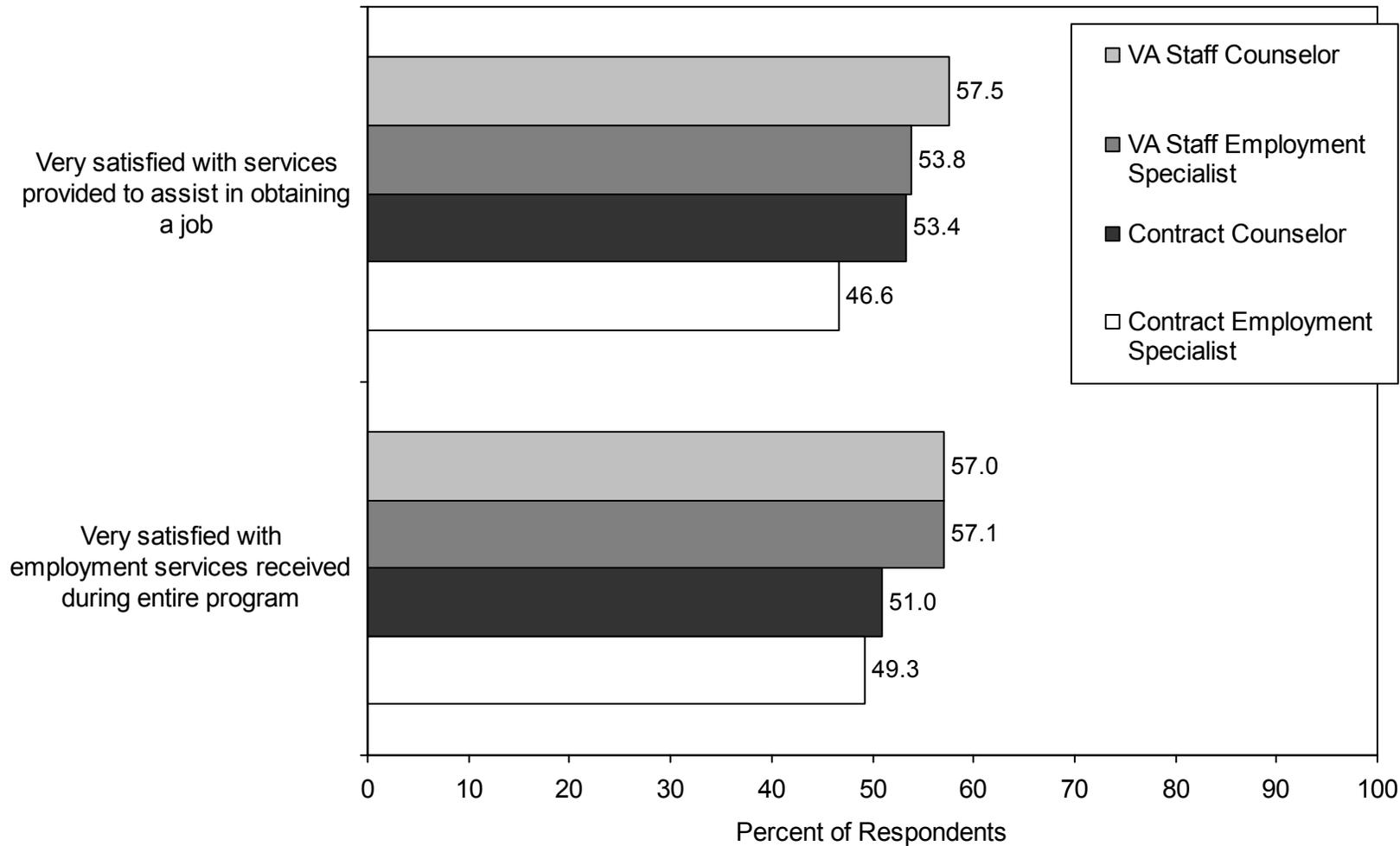
Those with contract employment specialists were significantly more likely to report receiving certain employment services such as resume preparation and job hunting strategies. Those with staff counselors or contract counselors were the most likely to report not receiving any employment services (54.3 percent and 55.7 percent respectively).



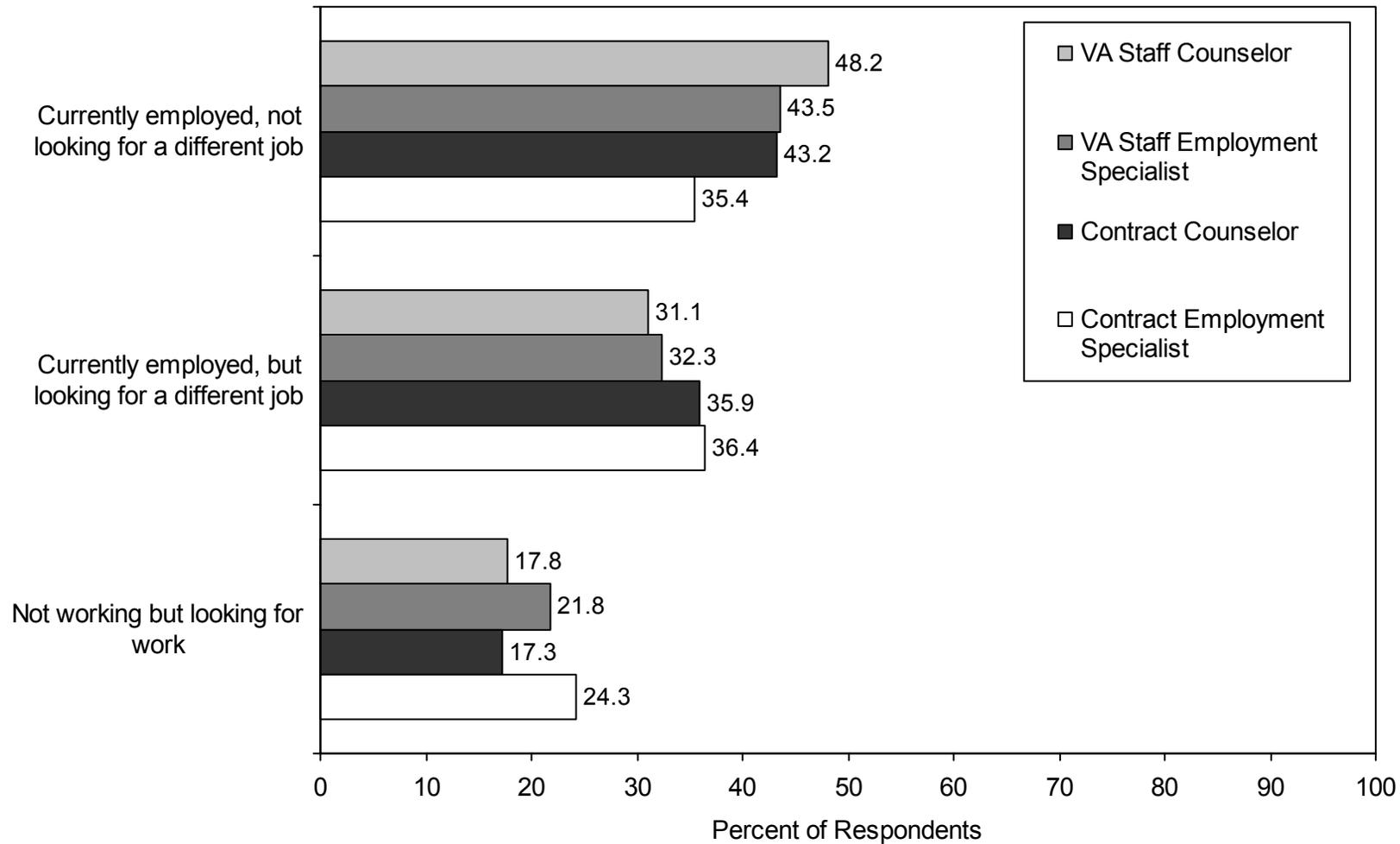
Both contract and staff employment specialists were more likely to provide referrals to other employment agencies or potential employers than contract or staff counselors. Almost a third (29.8 percent) of those who had contract employment specialists reported receiving a referral to a potential employer vs. only 14.4 percent of those with VA staff counselors.



Respondents assigned to contract employment specialists were most likely to receive referrals to other sources of employment information (18.0 percent). Respondents with contract counselors were the most likely to report **not** receiving any referrals to employment sources (53.8 percent), followed by those with VA staff counselors (45.9 percent).

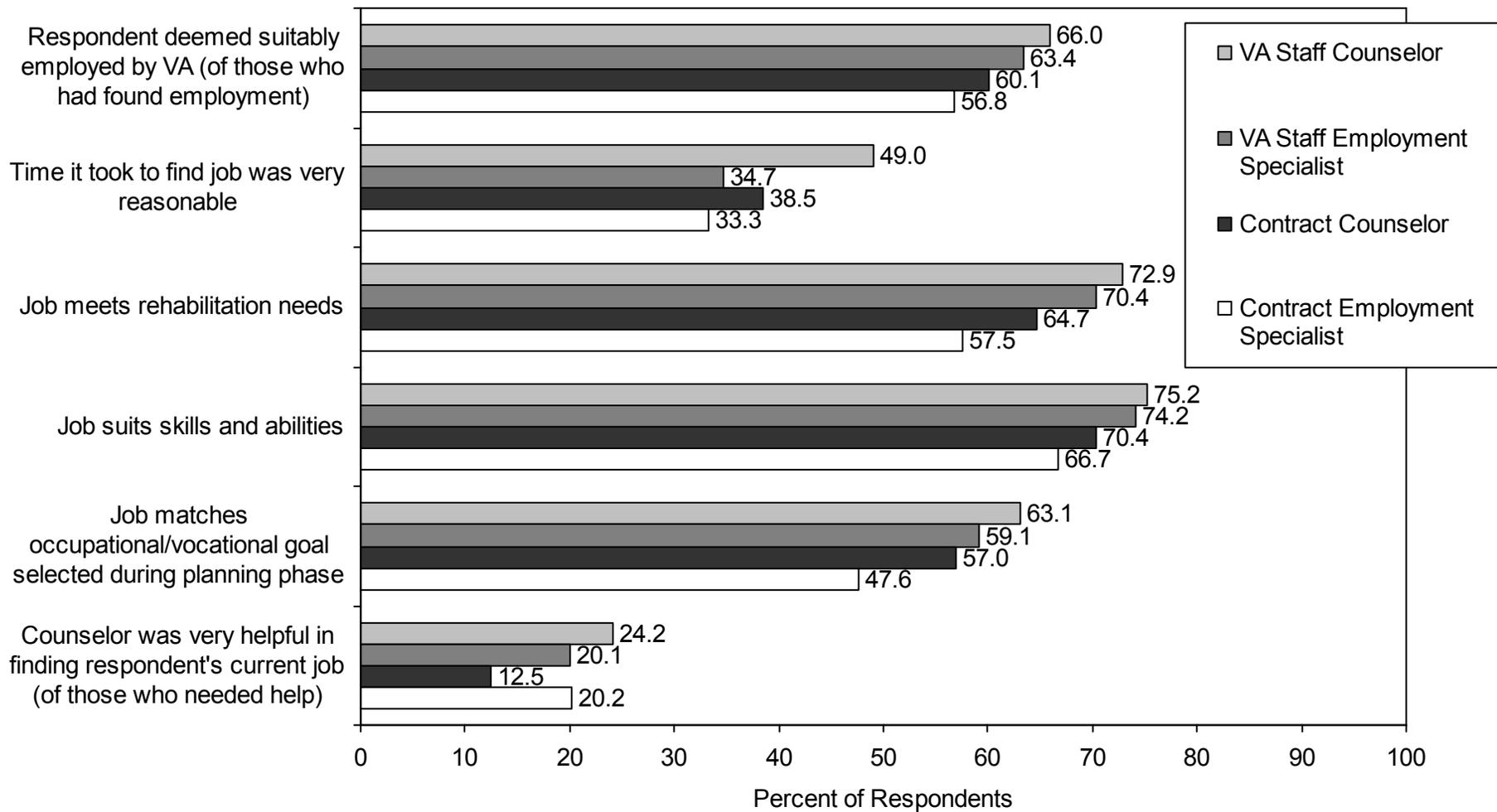


A significantly lower percentage (46.6 percent) of respondents who were assigned to contract employment specialists were **very** satisfied with the services provided to assist them in obtaining a job than those with VA staff counselors (57.5 percent). Those assigned to VA staff, either counselor or employment specialist, were also more likely to report being very satisfied with the employment services received throughout the program than those assigned to contract counselors or specialists.

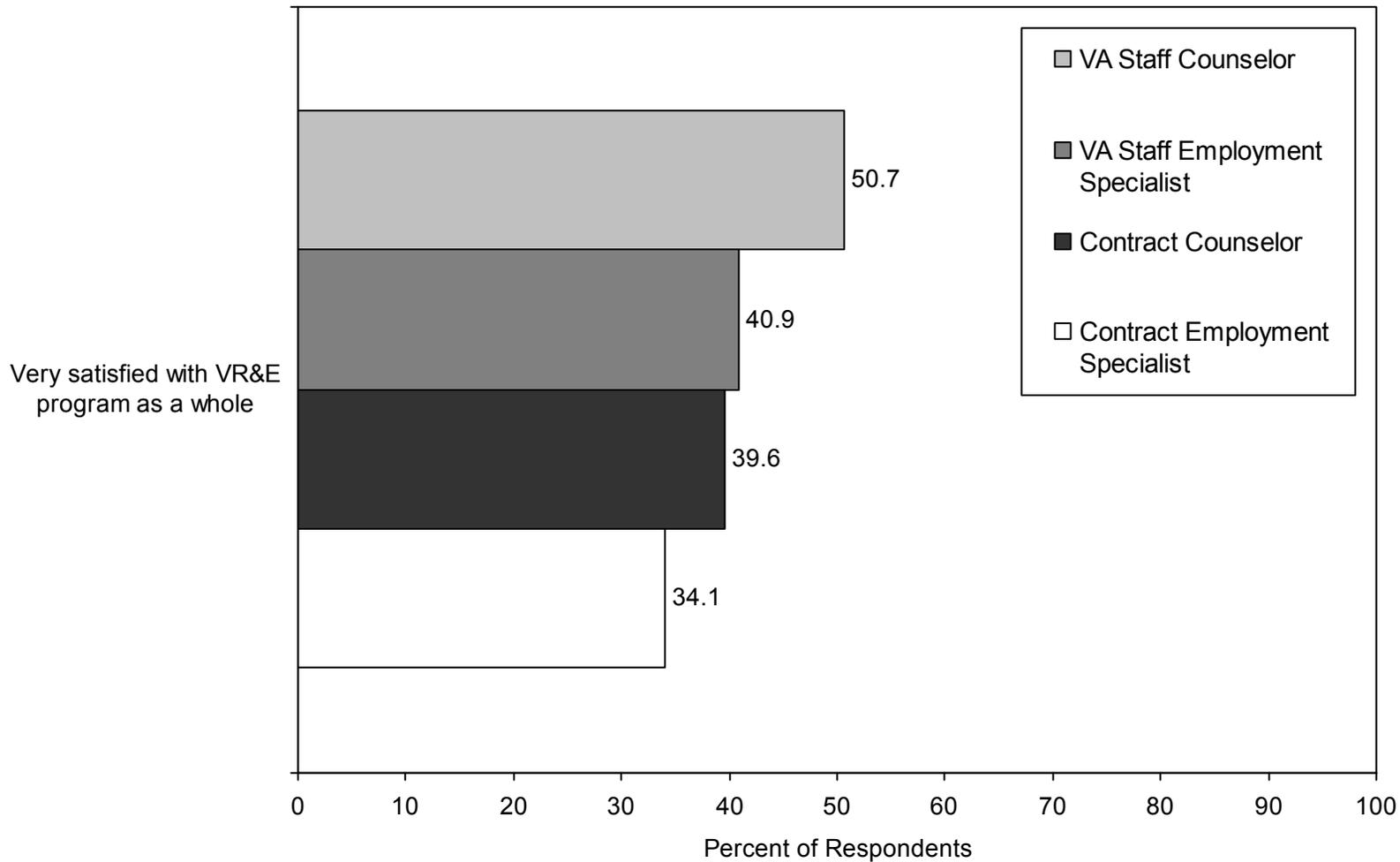


Respondents with VA staff counselors were the most likely to be currently employed and not looking for a different job (48.2 percent); those with contract employment specialists were the least likely (35.4 percent).

Employment Outcome



For respondents who were currently employed, those with VA staff counselors were more likely to report finding their job in a **very** reasonable amount of time (49.0 percent) than those with any other type of counselor assigned. They were also the most helpful in finding the respondent's current job (24.2 percent of those with VA staff counselors felt their counselor was very helpful); contract counselors were the least helpful (12.5 of respondents assigned to them felt they were very helpful).



Overall, those with VA staff counselors were significantly more likely to report being **very** satisfied (50.7 percent) with the VR&E program as a whole than respondents with VA staff employment specialists (40.9 percent), contract counselors (39.6 percent), or contract employment specialists (34.1 percent).

During the evaluation, planning and rehabilitation phases of the program, VA staff counselors were consistently rated higher than contract counselors on the majority of the issues addressed in the survey. Contract counselors did not receive significantly higher ratings on any question regarding these phases of the program. It seems that VA staff counselors are viewed to be more concerned about the individual and his or her personal needs and goals, and are also more likely to be thought of as caring and compassionate.

During the job ready phase, although contract employment specialists (and in many cases VA employment specialists) were more likely to provide some of the basic job search strategies and referrals than VA staff counselors or contract counselors, in all areas dealing with counseling and interpersonal skills the VA staff counselor again received higher ratings. Those with VA staff counselors were also more likely to be very satisfied with the employment services received once they were declared job ready, an interesting finding considering they (along with those assigned to contract counselors) were also the most likely to report **not** receiving any of the specific job search strategies or referrals listed on the survey. However, respondents who were currently employed and had been assigned to VA staff counselors were more likely to report that their counselor was helpful in finding their current job and that the time it took to find their job was very reasonable. These two factors obviously have a greater influence on overall satisfaction with employment services than help with interview skills or resume preparation.

In short, the factors which influence veterans' satisfaction with each phase of the program and the program as a whole all involve the attitude of the counselors and their level of concern for the veteran as an individual. On each of these factors, VA staff counselors perform better than contract counselors or employment specialists. In the beginning of the program, they are more likely to spend adequate time developing the rehabilitation plan while giving careful consideration to the veteran's disability. During the training or education phase, they are more likely to provide both emotional support and useful information regarding benefits available to encourage the veteran's ultimate success. Finally, they are more likely to be concerned about the quality of the veteran's job placement and whether it meets the veteran's rehabilitation goal, which is extremely important to both the long-term satisfaction and rehabilitation of the veteran.