

Best Practices in Workforce Development for Adults with Disabilities: A Review of the Literature

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are a number of benefits to employment for adults with disabilities; yet, undesirable employment rates for this group persist. Although there are a number of contributors to these outcomes (Anderson et al., 2018), for some individuals, a factor may be social skills and soft skills challenges. These skill gaps can impact the ability of individuals to obtain and maintain employment (Agran et al., 2016; Lindsay et al., 2014). Given the importance of soft skills on employability, people with disabilities should be afforded opportunities to develop these skills and enhance their workforce readiness (Agran et al., 2016). Thus, the aim of this literature review was to answer the question, “What are best practices in workforce development for adults with disabilities?”

We reviewed approximately 40 peer-reviewed publications from the years 2017-2024, many of which were existing literature reviews. We synthesized themes related to (a) instructional approaches of soft skills focused pre-employment programs for adults with disabilities, (b) topics covered within these programs, and (c) best practices in adult education, broadly. A summary of our findings and implications for UWA are as follows.

Key Content and Topics

- Training program content should address a variety of soft skills, as individuals need more than just job-specific and technical skills to be successful in obtaining and maintaining a job.
- Content should include job seeking skills, such as career exploration, resume development, and interviewing skills.
- Although it is difficult to prescribe an exact list of topics and skills to cover due to differences in how researchers conceptualize employment-related soft skills, potential work-related social skills and soft skills that may be covered in training programs include time management, work ethic, communication skills, problem solving, attendance, respect, teamwork, integrity, and honesty.

- Know your audience and customize the content to meet their unique needs. For example, offering a series of interventions in which participants first learn job seeking skills and then transition into job maintenance skills training, may be beneficial.

Instructional Approaches

- A combination of instructional approaches will likely be needed when designing a workforce development program.
- An evidence-based approach to training is *instruction + modeling + opportunities for practice with feedback*.
- Modeling and simulation is effective when done in-person or when done using video technology.
- Technology-based instruction (e.g., video-modeling, virtual or augmented reality, and use of iPhones for delivering cues) has been shown to be highly effective in promoting employment skill development and independence.
- Consider how to incorporate accommodations and individual supports into instruction, such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) and self-management checklists.
- Incorporate behavioral principles (e.g., prompting) and reinforcement where possible.
- Experiential learning opportunities have been featured in several programs and studies, and should be made available when possible.
- Online and in-person instruction have both been deemed effective modalities.
- Research on appropriate intervention dosage is inconsistent and limited. However, some insight can be gleaned from studies of effective programs that have taken place over several weeks or months.

Accessible Adult Education

- As a whole, literature on adult education best practices appears to be largely divorced from UWA's model and purpose.
- Results indicated a need for more rigorous studies, as there is not enough evidence to guide decision making around instructional and support strategies for adult learners.
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to optimize teaching and learning for all people based on the science of human learning. The UDL Guidelines offer concrete suggestions for providing learners with multiple means of (a) engagement, (b) representation, and (c) action and expression. It may be beneficial for UWA to examine the extent to which their curriculum and programming aligns with the UDL Guidelines to optimize learning and accessibility.

Example Programs

- Several similar soft-skills employment programs surfaced during the literature review. Given these programs have similar aims (and at times, formats) as Unified Work Academy, they may serve as a model for UWA programming.
- The Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET) program aims to improve the work-related social skills for young adults with disabilities. Research has indicated the program has positive effects on participant social skills and abilities, self-efficacy, and psychological wellness immediately after program completion.
- JobTIPS, an online employment training platform, allows users to asynchronously learn about transitioning to the workforce and improving employability skills. In one study, participants who used the JobTIPS program in conjunction with a virtual reality interviewing practice demonstrated significant improvements in appropriate verbal responses when interviewing for jobs. However, the improvements in body language that accompanied the verbal responses were not observed.

Overall, this literature review presented an overview of contemporary research on workforce development for adults with disabilities. Understanding the research on instructional approaches and recommended content coverage may assist UWA in determining alignment with their current programming. Although environmental, systemic factors cannot be ignored, teaching employability skills is one mechanism for promoting successful, competitive employment for adults with disabilities.