

Employment is often considered an integral part of adult life. Individuals with disabilities, however, frequently have less employment success than their peers without disabilities. In response to decades of poor postschool employment outcomes, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) now mandates that students with disabilities receive pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS). Pre-ETS provide opportunities for students to develop employability skills so that they are better prepared to enter the world of work. Employability skills are necessary to obtain and maintain employment.

What are Employability Skills?

Employability skills are general, nontechnical skills required for any job (see Table 1). They are needed for both entry-level and advanced positions (Ju et al., 2012). Employers consider employees with employability skills an asset because these skills are fundamental across all types of employment (Ju et al., 2012, 2014).

What the Research Says

Although most research examines employability skills in general, there is a small body of research that focuses specifically on employability skills for individuals with disabilities. Ju et al. (2012) examined the skills employers consider important for entry-level employees with and without disabilities. Skills rated highest (in order of importance) for both individuals with and without disabilities were demonstrating personal integrity/honesty, ability to follow instructions, ability to show respect for others, and ability to be on time. In addition, employers were asked to rank the importance of five skill areas (see Table 1). The skill areas most

valued by employers, in order of importance, were basic skills, basic work skills, social skills, personal traits, and higher order thinking skills. Employers ranked the importance of these skill areas the same for employees with and without disabilities. In a follow-up study, Ju et al. (2014) examined the skills educators considered most important for entry level workers and compared them with their 2012 findings. They found that educators and employers rated the same four skills as most important; however, educators ranked the importance of skill areas differently (i.e., social skills, personal traits, basic work skills, basic skills, higher-order thinking skills).

Employers are a natural source of information about the skills needed for employment; however, additional information can be gained from rehabilitation providers. These professionals work closely with employers to match individuals with disabilities to jobs, and they are often responsible for determining whether an individual receives rehabilitation services. Pickens and Dymond (2022) interviewed rehabilitation providers to determine the skills that impact their perceptions of an individual's employability. Providers identified social skills as the most important skill needed for employment. Other skills identified as critical were customer service skills (e.g., interacting well with others), self-determination skills (e.g., self-direction, problem solving), and independent living skills (e.g., good hygiene, able to navigate the community). These findings are similar to previous studies with rehabilitation providers that identified self-determination, social and communication skills, general work skills, and independent living skills as important (Moon et al., 2011; Riesen et al., 2014).

Table 1*Sample Employability Skills Valued by Employers*

Basic Skills	Higher Order Thinking Skills	Basic Work Skills	Social Skills	Personal Traits
Read with understanding	Identify and self-correct mistakes	Be on time	Respect others	Maintain personal integrity
Actively listen	Think critically	Seek help when needed	Use appropriate language	Be responsible
Speak clearly	Apply basic math	Follow schedules	Accept authority	Adapt well to change
Convey ideas in writing	Problem-solve	Cooperate with others	Maintain personal appearance	Demonstrate motivation to work
	Resolve conflicts	Stay with a task until finished	Accept criticism	Demonstrate interest in work
	Apply basic technology skills	Work well with diverse people	Work without supervision	
	Plan and work toward goals	Monitor work quality		
	Self-advocate			
	Think creatively			

Note. Based on the *Community Tool Box*, University of Kansas (2022)

Guidelines for Practice

Given so many critical employability skills, it can be difficult to know which skills to teach and when to begin instruction. In Illinois, the age at which a student must have a transition component in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) is 14.5. Waiting until a student reaches transition age to begin teaching employability skills may be too late, particularly for students who require explicit instruction and repeated practice to learn. By initiating instruction on age-appropriate employability skills in the elementary or middle grades, students will have additional time to develop and refine their skills.

To determine which skills are most important to teach, begin by using a variety of age-appropriate transition assessments to identify the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. Then, select skills for instruction that align with the transition assessment findings and support the student's progress toward their postschool goals. Instruction on the selected skills need not involve creation of a separate course. In fact, instruction

on most employability skills can easily be embedded into existing academic instruction. Importantly, skills learned in the classroom may not transfer to actual employment settings automatically. Providing students opportunities to demonstrate their skills within work-based learning experiences will help clarify whether the student has developed adequate employability skills. In summary, there are a variety of skills needed for employment. It is important to start teaching employability skills early to ensure students acquire the general, non-technical skills needed for all jobs.

Additional Resources

Workplace Readiness Training
www.wintac.org/topic-areas/pre-employment-transition-services/resources/resources-workplace-readiness-training

Essential Skills to Getting a Job: What Young People with Disabilities Need to Know
www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/documents/essential_job_skills.pdf

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