

# Using Ecological Assessments to Identify Workplace Social Skills for Instruction

In compliance with federal laws (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act of 2014), educators and vocational rehabilitation personnel have primarily focused on teaching students with disabilities the technical skills needed for employment. Although technical skills are required within every type of job, most job loss faced by individuals with disabilities is due to poor workplace social skills rather than insufficient technical skills (Agran et al., 2016). The workplace is a social venue and thus being successful in the workplace requires a significant number of social skills. In addition, not every job site requires the same social competencies, so it can be difficult to determine which workplace social skills to teach students as they prepare for employment. One way to effectively identify workplace social skills for instruction is by conducting an ecological assessment within work experience settings.

## What are Ecological Assessments?

An ecological assessment (also known as an ecological inventory) is a process used to identify the *activities* that naturally take place in a setting and the *skills* needed to engage in those activities (Brown et al., 1979). Assessment information is gathered by observing the setting and documenting how people typically participate. Additional information may be gathered by talking with people who frequent the setting (Root et al., 2020).

Ecological assessments may investigate the range of activities, tasks, and skills needed across the work setting or they may focus more narrowly on one activity (e.g., conversing with co-workers). Following an ecological assessment, a discrepancy analysis is completed to determine how a student's performance compares with the expectations for the setting (Root et al., 2020). Skills that are missing or underdeveloped are then targeted for instruction.

## What the Research Says

To conduct an ecological assessment, begin by identifying the specific activities to be assessed within the work experience (Dymond, 2020; Root et al., 2020). For example, a work experience at a retail store may involve the activities of obtaining products from the stockroom and shelving the products in various sections of the store. Other non-work activities performed regularly (e.g., using the bathroom, breakroom, and arrival/departure area) should also be assessed. Observe each activity several times and make a list of the social skills employees use. If possible, determine the number of times each social skill is used and the context in which it is used. Table 1 provides an example of how to organize assessment results.

Following the ecological assessment, conduct a discrepancy analysis for each social skill observed to determine how the student's social skills compare with the skills demonstrated by employees who work at the business (Root et al., 2020). Begin by developing a list of the observable steps needed to perform each social skill (i.e., a task analysis). Observe the student completing each activity (without providing any instruction to the student) and record the steps the student completes independently (Dymond, 2020). Consider not only whether the student is able to perform the skills accurately, but also the rate, duration, and quality of the responses (Reichle et al., 2019; Root et al., 2020). Table 2 provides a sample method for recording findings from a discrepancy analysis for one social skill—initiating a request for help when needed. Once the discrepancy analysis is completed, review the findings to determine which steps the student can already perform, and which ones should be targeted for instruction.

**Table 1***Ecological Assessment in the Appliance Department at a Retail Store (10:00-11:00 AM)*

Social Skills Needed	Number of Occurrences	Context in Which Social Skills Were Observed
Approach customers and ask if they need assistance	15	Customer is looking at a product or customer appears to be looking for a product.
Respond to customer questions	8	Customer requests more information about a product or asks about the location of products within the department or in other departments.
Initiate request for help from another employee	1	Employee does not know the answer to a customer's question.
Converse with customers and co-workers	19	Employee asks a customer how they are doing today or has a casual conversation with other employees when there are no customers present.

**Table 2***Discrepancy Analysis Example for Initiating Request for Help from Another Employee*

Steps	Date	Accuracy	Comments on Quality, Duration, and Rate
Approach co-worker or supervisor	Oct. 12	+	Approached co-worker appropriately and waited until the co-worker was looking in students' direction.
	Oct. 13	-	Approached co-worker, but did so at an inappropriate time.
	Oct. 14	-	Approached supervisor while they were engaged in a conversation with another employee.
State the problem/issue	Oct. 12	-	Did not state the problem coherently, left out important details.
	Oct. 13	+	Stated the problem with sufficient detail.
	Oct. 14	-	Did not state the problem coherently, left out important details.
Ask for assistance	Oct. 12	-	Did not ask for assistance.
	Oct. 13	-	Explained problem, but did not ask for assistance.
	Oct. 14	-	Did not ask for assistance.

Note. + = correct; - = incorrect

## Guidelines for Practice

An ecological assessment is an effective tool for determining the types of social skills needed at a particular work experience site. Furthermore, by conducting a discrepancy analysis, educators can determine if students have acquired the social skills needed at the work experience site or if additional instruction is warranted. The following points should be considered when assessing workplace social skills:

1. If possible, conduct an ecological assessment prior to placing students at a work experience site. Use the assessment findings to prepare students for the experience by providing initial instruction on workplace social skills before the work experience begins.
2. Assess all settings the student accesses at the work experience site. Workplace social skills are needed while completing work tasks, but they also are essential during non-work activities (e.g., taking a break, arriving at work, using the restroom).
3. The workplace is dynamic—stimuli, responses, and their functions across conditions may vary. When conducting a discrepancy analysis, consider whether the student can perform the workplace social skill accurately, but also whether the rate, duration, and quality of the responses match the requirements of the setting.
4. A discrepancy analysis may reveal many skills to target for instruction. Select social skills that are used frequently across the work experience site. Also consider selecting skills that are high priority for the business or essential to the student's safety and well-being.
5. Many individuals with disabilities struggle to generalize the skills they learn in one setting

to other settings. Teach workplace social skills across multiple settings including the work experience site, academic classes, extracurricular activities, and during community-based instruction.

## Additional Resources

### Workplace Social Skills Webinar

[ictw.illinois.edu/resources/webinars/workplace-social-skills](http://ictw.illinois.edu/resources/webinars/workplace-social-skills)

## References

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