

Much attention has been given to teaching students with disabilities the technical skills needed to perform job tasks. Technical skills, also known as hard skills, are the skills and knowledge necessary for performing a specific job or task. Although technical skills are important for gaining and maintaining employment, employers in the 21st century have shifted away from hiring individuals based on their technical skills to hiring those who possess effective social skills. Employers expect employees to have acquired strong social skills prior to entering the workforce so that they can focus on training employees to perform specific job tasks (Agran et al., 2016; Pickens & Dymond, 2022). This research brief will focus on preparing students for the social aspects of employment.

What are Workplace Social Skills?

The term workplace social skills refers to the breadth of skills needed to engage in social interactions at the workplace. These skills cluster within two categories: (a) work-related and (b) nonwork-related (Kirmeyer, 1988; Chadsey-Rusch et al., 1989). Interactions that are directly related to job duties are considered work-related while interactions that are unrelated to job duties are considered nonwork-related. Both types of interactions are essential. In some cases, the skills needed to participate in work-related and nonwork-related interactions are the same. Table 1 provides examples of skills that align with each category of social interactions.

What the Research Says

Individuals with disabilities are employed at much lower rates than individuals without disabilities (i.e., 17.9% compared to 61.8%; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Such poor employment outcomes are often linked to having limited social skills (Agran et al., 2016). In addition, findings from Ju (2012) report that employers often choose not to hire individuals with disabilities due to their limited social skills. This finding coincides with findings from Riesen et al. (2014) who examined school to work barriers and

Table 1
Workplace Social Skills

Sample Skills
Work-Related
Following directions
Requesting assistance
Requesting clarification
Sharing work information
Responding to and accepting criticism
Nonwork-Related
Sharing information about topics of interest
Conversational skills
Social amenities
Work and Nonwork-Related
Active listening
Verbal and nonverbal communication
Initiating interactions
Responding appropriately
Appropriate social behaviors

found that poor social skills was rated highly as a barrier to employment for individuals with disabilities according to vocational rehabilitation counselors, community rehabilitation providers, and special education teachers.

There is research to suggest that employers value social skills over technical skills (Agran et al., 2016). In fact, several studies have looked at employability skills valued by employers and found that social skills are ranked among the top skills most valued (Ju et al., 2012; Ju et al., 2014; Robles, 2012). This is not surprising, considering social skills are a positive predictor of successful post-school employment for individuals with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2021).

Although employers value social skills over technical skills, there is limited research on effective practices for teaching individuals with disabilities workplace social skills. A recent review of the literature (Birri et al., in-press) found only 26 interventions for

teaching workplace social skills to individuals with disabilities. Out of the 26 studies only one (Park et al., 2018) was of methodological soundness and only three studies were conducted in the last 10 years. Results from these studies do, however, point to several promising practices for teaching workplace social skills (see Table 2). In addition, the National Technical Assistance Center (NTACT) has identified two research-based practices for teaching workplace social skills—simulation and community-based instruction (see additional resources).

Table 2

Promising Instructional Strategies

Strategies
Performance feedback
Modeling
System of least prompts
Device assisted instruction
Verbal instruction
Video modeling
Constant time delay

Note. Source: Birri et al. (2022).

Guidelines for Practice

Successful employment often depends on the presence of effective social skills. Educators can help students acquire workplace social skills by teaching these skills throughout the day and specifically during work-based learning experiences. Below are several guidelines for practice that may assist educators in planning for instruction.

- Employers value employees with strong social skills over employees with strong technical skills. Therefore, vocational instruction needs to include attention to the social skills needed in the workplace and not just the technical skills associated with specific job tasks.
- There are two types of social interactions that occur in the workplace (i.e., work-related, non-work-related). Consider teaching both types of social skills so students acquire the range of skills needed within the workplace.

- There are several instructional strategies for teaching workplace social skills that are supported in the research literature (see Table 2 and additional resources section). These practices may serve as an appropriate starting point when selecting instructional strategies to teach workplace social skills.

References

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Additional Resources

Research Based Practices According to NTACT: Using Simulation to Teach Social Skills
bit.ly/NTACT-simulation_social-skills-research-based-practice

Research Based Practices According to NTACT: Using Community Based Instruction to Teach Communication Skills
bit.ly/NTACT-CBI_communication-research-based-practice

