

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) is a legislative mandate focused on improving the employment outcomes of secondary students with disabilities. WIOA requires that funding from the State/Federal Vocational Rehabilitation System be used to ensure that state vocational rehabilitation agencies (e.g., Illinois Department of Human Services) in collaboration with schools provide pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) to all students with disabilities who qualify, or could potentially qualify, for vocational rehabilitation services. Under WIOA, vocational rehabilitation counselors and teachers are required to engage students in the following five required pre-ETS: (a) job exploration counseling, (b) work-based learning experiences, (c) counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs, (d) workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and (e) instruction in self-advocacy. This research brief will focus on *workplace readiness*.

What is Workplace Readiness?

Self-advocacy is defined as the ability to understand and communicate one’s needs, interests, and views to others in an effective manner. It also involves the ability to make informed decisions. Students learn to become self-advocates by acquiring self-advocacy skills in four critical areas: (a) knowledge of self, (b) knowledge of rights, (c) communication, and (d) leadership (Test et al., 2005). The language used to discuss self-advocacy is sometimes synonymous with the term self-determination: a set of behaviors an individual engages in to make vital changes within their life (Burke et al., 2020; Test et al., 2005). Table 1 provides a list of sample self-advocacy skills.

Table 1

Workplace Readiness Skills

Sample Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication and interpersonal skills ▪ Financial literacy ▪ Integrity ▪ Networking ▪ Orientation and mobility ▪ Problem solving and critical thinking ▪ Professionalism ▪ Teamwork ▪ Workplace safety

What the Research Says

Soft skills are important for gaining and maintaining employment (Clark et al., 2018). These skills are valued by employers and associated with increased workplace performance (Robles, 2012). Despite the importance of soft skills, there is limited agreement about which skills are most important for job success. For example, a study of employers found that the top four soft skills valued for both employees with and without disabilities were personal integrity, ability to follow instructions, respect for others, and being on time (Ju et al., 2012). Another study noted that employers rated integrity, communication, and courtesy as most important (Robles, 2012). Research has also investigated the perspectives of school transition personnel, who rated the skills of seeking clarification for unclear instructions, arriving at work on time, and refraining from inappropriate touching as most important (Agran et al., 2016). Furthermore, a comprehensive review of the literature across job sectors and regions of the world identified five key soft skills: social skills, communication, higher-order thinking skills, self-control, and positive self-concept (Lippman et al., 2015).

Research has indicated that a major reason that individuals with disabilities face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than individuals without disabilities is the lack of work-related soft skills (Newman et al., 2011; Wehman, 2011). Difficulties in acquiring soft skills may be due to challenges with social communication skills, executive functioning (e.g., organizational skills, self-regulation), mobility, problem solving, and critical thinking. Although, it is well documented that individuals with disabilities struggle to acquire soft skills (e.g., Agran et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2019), most secondary programs for individuals with disabilities focus on teaching technical skills (Guy et al., 2009). This suggests that there is a gap between

what is recommended and valued by employers and what is being taught within secondary programs.

Guidelines for Practice

There are many barriers to teaching soft skills. For example, many educators struggle with locating resources to teach soft skills, obtaining support from community partners, and collaborating with families to reinforce skills outside of school. To aid educators and service providers in their efforts to improve workplace readiness, Table 2 provides several guidelines for practice that may be helpful.

Table 2

Guidelines for Practice

Guideline	Rationale
Build partnerships with employers	Building relationships with local employers can provide valuable insights into the types of skills they look for in their employees. This may help to clarify the soft skills needed in various job sectors and assist Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to prioritize the skills emphasized with each student.
Use data from transition assessments to identify each student's present level of performance.	Transition assessments are the foundation for a thoughtful and meaningful transition plan. Collecting data on students' current workplace readiness skills will help identify what skills should be targeted for instruction.
Develop instructional plans around students' needs using the workplace readiness toolkit (see additional resources)	To help students improve their workplace readiness skills they will need multiple opportunities for practice. The workplace readiness toolkit provides various activities that can be modified and adapted to meet the needs of each student.
Involve families in practicing workplace readiness skills at home or in the community	Families can provide additional opportunities for students to practice soft skills at home and in the community. This will help students to further refine their skills and generalize these skills across settings.

Additional Resources

Workplace Readiness Checklist

wintac-s3.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/topic-areas/ta01-pre-ets/checklist-WPRT-20-0806.pdf

Workplace Readiness Skills

centerontransition.org/transition/Employment/workplacereadinessskills.html

Workplace Readiness Toolkit

centerontransition.org/publications/download.cfm?id=105

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