



Employer Toolkit

*Sustaining Competitive Employment for Individuals with
Intellectual Disabilities*

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Presenter



Robyn L. Lewis, Ph.D.

Assistant Director, IIRER

University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign

robynl@illinois.edu

217-300-6641

Personal Background



- More than 30 years experience in disability employment.
 - 1 year Assistant Director, IIRER
 - 3 years Senior Policy Advisor, Illinois Division of Rehabilitation Services
 - 22 years High School Transition Special Educator
 - 5 years Direct Support Professional
- Advocate for as long as I remember.
- I am a disabled veteran.
- I have a chronic health condition.
- Work positively impacts my well-being.

Work gives you meaning and
purpose and life is empty without
it.

STEPHEN HAWKING

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Agenda



- Toolkit foundation
- Four Competencies of Exemplary Employers
- Employer Engagement Process
- Employer Self-Assessment
- Educator Facilitation Guide
- What's to come- Career Innovations Project

Career Innovations Project



- Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration
- 5-year, \$3.2M initiative (10/1/2026- 9/31/2031)
- Develop vocational rehabilitation professionals (current and aspiring)
- Increase capacity to conduct career assessment activities
- Employer engagement is integral to connecting individual's strengths with employer need



Why an Employer Engagement Toolkit for Educators?

- Educators need positive transition outcomes for students.
- Students need meaningful post-school opportunities.
- Employers need workforce solutions
- Employers are experts in business, not disability
- Special Educators are experts in disability, not business
- Toolkit helps bridge the gap between School and Work



What informs the toolkit



- Lewis, R. L. (2021). *Employment practices that sustain the competitive employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities: Employers' perceptions* (Publication No. 28867378) [[Doctoral dissertation](#), Saint Louis University].
- Strauser, D. G., Price, R. A., Brehmer, C. E., & Strauser, D. R. (2026). *Exploring employer's successful hiring and retention practices of individuals with disabilities*. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 69(2), 109–119. [SAGE Publications](#).
- Accenture Report: [The Disability Inclusion Imperative](#)
- DisabilityIN: [2024 Disability Equality Index Report](#)

What is an exemplary employer?



- **Strauser et.al.:**

- (a) a history of hiring and retaining people with disabilities,

- (b) actively participating in collaborations to enhance their capacity to employ people with disabilities, or

- (c) having publicly available statements about their organizational commitment to hiring people with disabilities.

- **Accenture & DisabilityIN:**

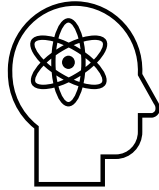
- Disability Inclusion Leaders providing leading- edge disability programs and initiatives that can be potentially implemented by others.

Competencies of exemplary employers



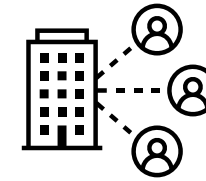
- Literature review of employment practices that sustain the competitive employment of persons with disabilities.
- Validated through survey of employers who sustained (>90 days) employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities (Lewis, 2021).
- Categorized into four domains (competencies)
 - Knowledge of Employment and Disability
 - Demand-Side Factors related to employers' needs
 - Value of employees with intellectual disabilities
 - Employment Allies

Four Competencies of exemplary employers



Knowledge

- ✓ Disability awareness & understanding
- ✓ Accommodation knowledge
- ✓ Inclusion strategies
- ✓ Resource awareness



Needs

- ✓ Align hiring practices with workforce demands
- ✓ Identify operational gaps
- ✓ Roles structured to optimize productivity
- ✓ Strength based approach (job fit/match)

Four Competencies (cont.)



Value

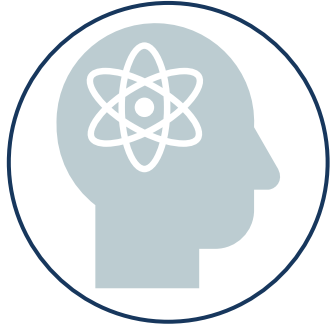
- ✓ Business benefits of inclusive employment
 - ✓ Retention
 - ✓ Productivity
 - ✓ Workplace Culture
 - ✓ Cost Savings



Allies

- ✓ External supports
 - ✓ Educators
 - ✓ VR Professionals
 - ✓ Employment Specialists
- ✓ Internal supports
 - ✓ Champions

What we know about employers



Knowledge

- ✓ Lack applied disability knowledge
- ✓ Misconceptions about skill level and productivity
- ✓ Guidance increases hiring confidence
- ✓ Positive experience leads to future hiring



Needs

- ✓ Employers hire to fill real business needs
- ✓ Skills must match open positions
- ✓ Care about turnover, productivity, and workforce gaps
- ✓ Must address operational realities



Value

- ✓ Employees with disabilities are reliable & work hard
- ✓ Inclusive hiring strengthens culture & employer brand
- ✓ Universal design benefits all workers
- ✓ See it to BELIEVE It



Allies

- ✓ Professionals serve as workforce connectors
- ✓ Job matching & preparation reduce employer risk
- ✓ Ongoing consultation supports retention
- ✓ Strong cross-system partnerships improve outcomes



“ Companies who embrace best practice for employing and supporting people with disabilities in their workforce outperform their peers. ”

Accenture

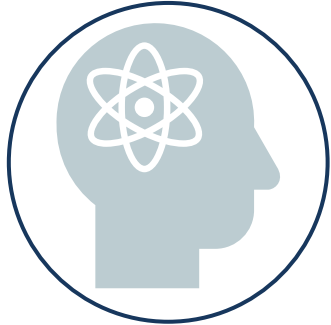
1.6x higher **revenue**

2.6x more net **income**

2.0x higher **profit margins**

25% more **productivity**

Educators can foster employment outcomes



Knowledge

- ✓ Importance of job matching & carving
- ✓ Know your employment support professionals
- ✓ Learn local business
- ✓ Educate students & families: disclosure, workplace rights



Needs

- ✓ Connect students & families with local employment supports
- ✓ Recognize student skills-current & potential
- ✓ Match student skills to open positions



Value

- ✓ BELIEVE student can work
- ✓ Connect student abilities to work goals
- ✓ Increase inclusive opportunities at school, work, and community
- ✓ Highlight the success stories



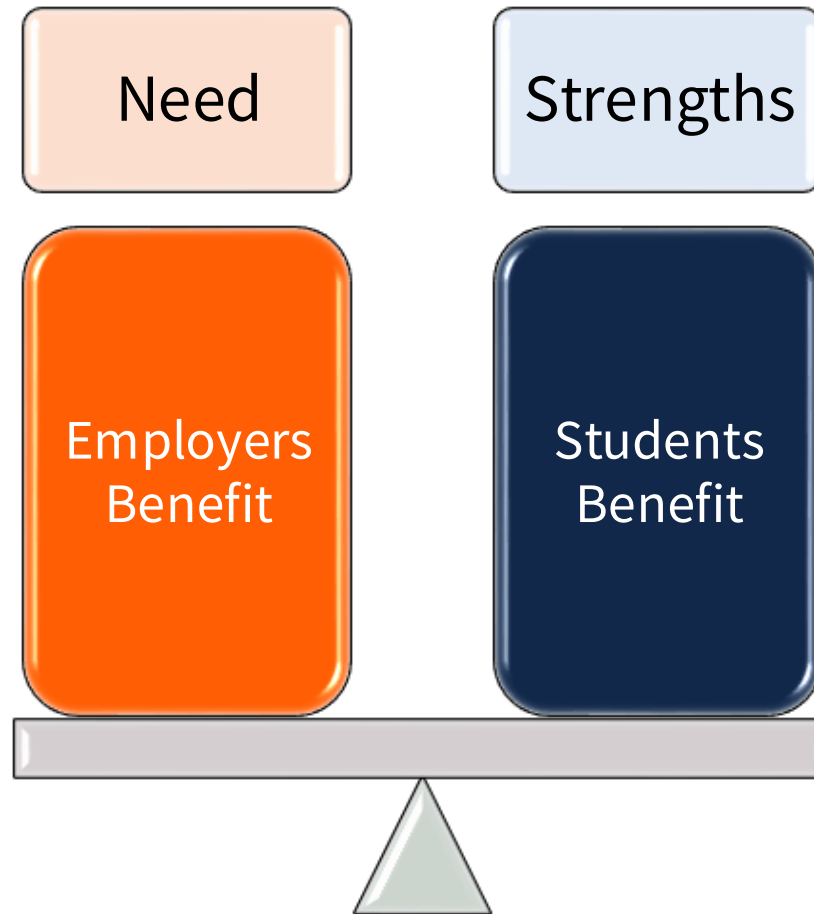
Allies

- ✓ Partner with employers for job trials, internships, job shadows
- ✓ Collaborate with employment support professionals
- ✓ Collaborate with community to meet workforce needs

I want individuals with intellectual disabilities to be employed at a job they love, one that makes them feel fulfilled, important, and needed.



Growing Exemplary Employers



Steps for Employer Engagement

1

Build employer partnerships

2

Employer awareness and education

3

Co-design employment pathways

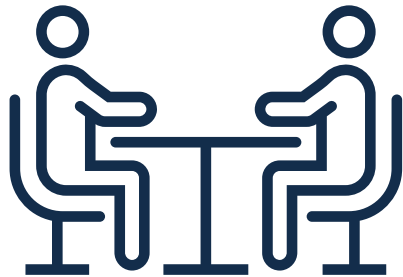
4

Communication and relationship management

5

Incentives and Supports

1. Build Employer Partnerships



- ✓ Identify employers whose workforce needs align with inclusive hiring
- ✓ Engage small businesses and business networks
- ✓ Shift from placement thinking to long-term partnership
- ✓ **Assess employer readiness**

2. Increase Awareness and Education



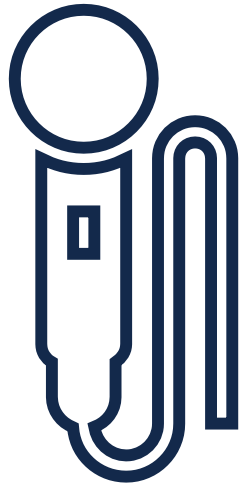
- ✓ **Use assessment results to prepare employers**
- ✓ Share data on retention, productivity, and business value
- ✓ Address myths about cost, safety, and performance
- ✓ Position yourself as supportive workforce partners
- ✓ Offer short trainings and simple, practical resources

3. Co-Design Employment Pathways



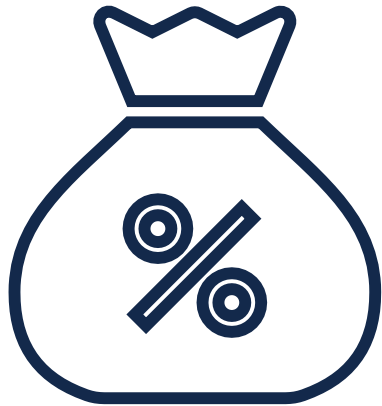
- ✓ Listen to employer challenges before proposing solutions
- ✓ Match individual skills to real business tasks
- ✓ Use job shadowing, work-based learning experiences, trials, or internships (paid or unpaid)
- ✓ Support long-term growth and advancement

4. Strengthen relationships



- ✓ Use clear, business-focused language
- ✓ Maintain regular check-ins and one point of contact
- ✓ Gather feedback and adjust supports
- ✓ Share success stories to reinforce partnership

5. Leverage Incentives & Support

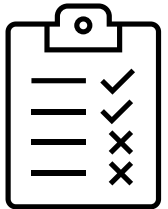


- ✓ Opportunities for everyone to learn
- ✓ Provide job coaching and accommodation support
- ✓ Offer employer recognition and peer networking
- ✓ Use ongoing follow-up to sustain partnerships

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Employer Self-Assessment

Employer Assessment

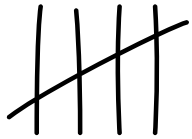


- Self- Assessment
- Four Competencies
 - Knowledge
 - Need (Demand-Side Factors)
 - Value
 - Allies
- 10 questions per competency



- 4-point Likert Scale
 1. Never
 2. Sometimes
 3. Often
 4. Always

Scoring and Interpretation



Add all four category scores:

45–60 → Exemplary Employer

25–44 → Emerging Employer

15–24 → Developing Infrastructure

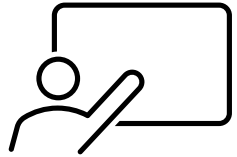
Below 15 → Foundational Stage

Determine Readiness



Employer Score	What it Means	Teacher Strategy
High (45-60)	Ready for immediate engagement	Move to pathway development
Moderate (25-44)	Open, but needs structure	Provide support, clarify expectations
Low (15-24)	Limited Experience	Focus on education and small experiences (WBLE)
Very Low (<15)	Not ready yet	Start with awareness and relationship-building

Prepare Employers and Students



- Identify employer gaps
- Recommend training
- Recommend resources
- Who, what, where, & how
- Ask targeted follow-up questions
- Identify opportunities for work-based learning
- Prepare students for the identified employer

Knowledge



ASSESS

Does employer understand disability?
Do they know how to provide accommodations?
Do they have prior experience?

ENGAGE

LOW: simple explanations, “what to expect”, success stories
HIGH: quick job matches, less education, more logistics

PREPARE (Students)

Practice explaining strengths and support needs
Role-play workplace communications
Teach self-advocacy and disability disclosure

Need



ASSESS

Hiring needs and workforce gaps
Tasks that are hard to fill
Workplace structure and workflow

ENGAGE

DON'T:

“Do you want to hire a student”

DO:

“What tasks are difficult for staff to complete or take time away from skilled workers”

PREPARE (Students)

Task analysis exercises
Exposure to real workplace routines
Simulated job tasks aligned to employer needs

Value



ASSESS

Does employer see benefit or only risk?

Are they motivated by productivity, retention, or culture?

ENGAGE

Emphasize reliability, consistency, and task focus

Share examples of improved workflow or retention

Highlight reduced turnover and support provided

PREPARE (Students)

Teach workplace expectations (attendance, productivity)

Practice “soft-skills” (teamwork, following instructions)

Build stamina and independence

Allies



ASSESS

Is the employer open to outside support

Do they want ongoing communication

Do they understand everyone's role (teacher, coach)

ENGAGE

Position yourself as a partner

- Be the single point of contact
- Reduce burden on employer
- Provide consistent communication

PREPARE (Students)

Practice workplace problem-solving

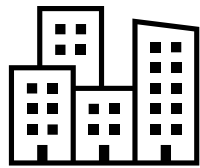
Teach when and how to ask for help

Build independence gradually

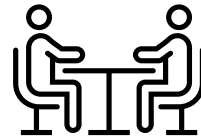
What's next



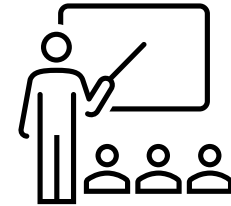
Employer Engagement Toolkits (Facilitation Guides)



Employers

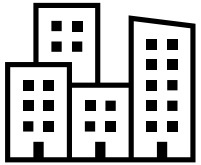


**Employment Support
Professionals**

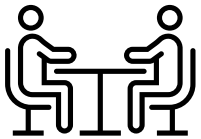


Educators

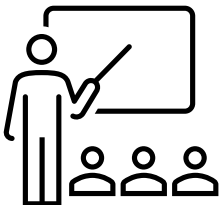
Toolkit Table of Contents



- List of Acronyms
- Glossary of Terms
- Human Services to Business Language Translation Guide



- Who's Who
- Facilitation Guide
- Tools related to the Four Competencies



Content Sample: Business Vocabulary



Human Services Language	Business-Friendly Language	Why It Works
Client / Consumer / Student	Employee / Candidate / Talent	Focuses on workforce contribution
Placement	Hire / Talent Match	Emphasizes Business Decision
Services	Workforce solutions	Aligns with Operational need
Job Coach	On-Site Training support	Reduces stigma, clarifies role
Accommodations	Workplace Adjustments/ Productivity Tools	Focuses on Effectiveness

Toolkit Enhancements

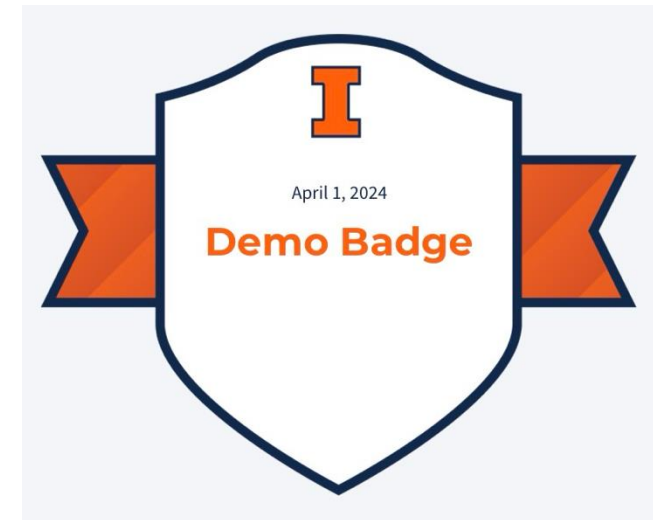
- AI enhanced Assessments
- Auto-generate on demand training topics
- Stackable Digital badges
- Industry recognized credentials



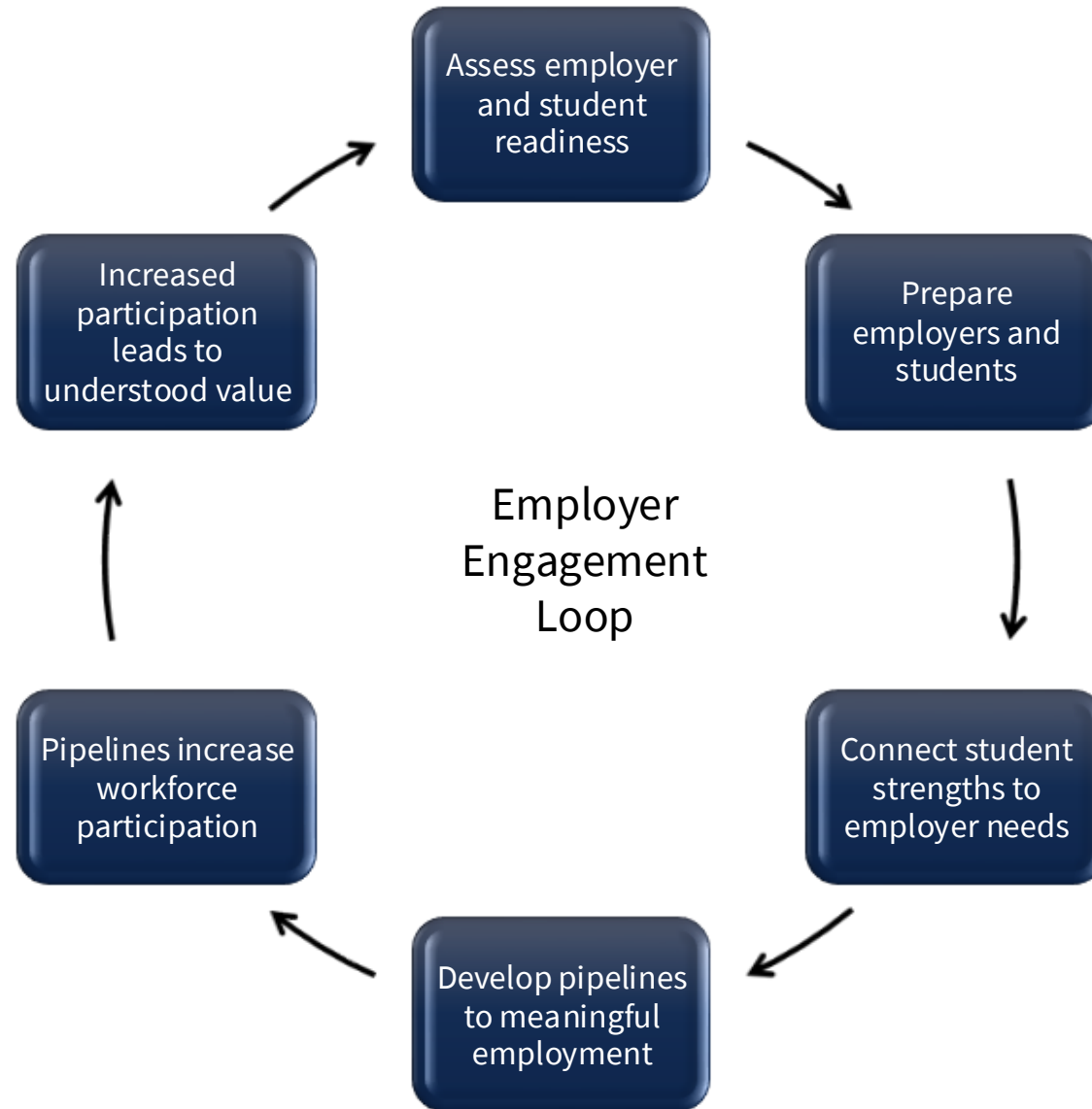
Intended Outcomes



- Human Service professionals proficient in Employer Engagement
- Employers proficient in engaging local talent and supported from Human Services
- Digital Resources
 - Universal
 - Targeted
 - Intensive
- Statewide and National Reach



What We Learned...





Thank You!



Please take our survey.



Illinois Institute for Rehabilitation and Employment Research

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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