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Addressing Employment Barriers of Young Adults with Disabilities Transitioning Into Employment Post-Education

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Addressing Employment Barriers of Young Adults with Disabilities

Transitioning Into Employment Post-Education

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A Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project Final Report

Presented to the Faculty of Western New England University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Entry-Level Doctorate

in

Occupational Therapy

_____

by

July 2024

Addressing Employment Barriers of Young Adults with Disabilities

Transitioning Into Employment Post-Education

A Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project Final Report

By

Mary Hall, OT/s

July 2024

APPROVED BY:
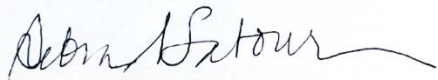
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Addressing Employment Barriers of Young Adults with Disabilities

Transitioning Into Employment Post-Education

Mary Hall, OT/s

Western New England University

Doctoral Experiential Capstone Final Report

July 19, 2024

Abstract

This project focused on addressing barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities by considering the stakeholders in the employment cycle and expanding the involvement of Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs) in transition services. The initial research identified a need for more OTP involvement in transition (Mankey, 2011).

Over fourteen weeks, this student undertook the development, implementation, analysis, and modification of a program named World Seekers. The initial World Seekers program partnered with Western New England University's BEARPAW Center (BPC) and Hampden-Wilbraham Regional Schools (HWRS). The participants were students in the transition school at HWRS. This program, which consisted of six group intervention sessions held both on the Western New England University (WNEU) campus and at HWRS, was positively received by the participants. Feedback on all sessions was completed by having the participants fill out simple post-session surveys. The feedback collected was then used to refine the sessions into a final format and led to the development of a Group Protocol Manual and Leader's Guide. These materials were created to encourage the continuation, expansion, and modification of the World Seekers Program and are currently under consideration for copyright (Appendix A).

Additionally, a semi-structured, researcher-developed interview was created based on an expansive literature review (Appendix B) and needs assessment on the themes, barriers, and perceptions of employment from various stakeholders. The questions were designed based on the following research question: What are the barriers and supports current employers experience when hiring individuals with disabilities? The study concluded with a total participation of one participant. Collected data was analyzed to identify relevant themes. Because of the limited number of participants, comparisons between employers were not possible. Still, the main

conclusions were that the key to addressing the labor shortage lies in diversifying the types of

workers a company employs, that employers need more education and support to gain

confidence for being managers of workers with disabilities (WWD), and finally, that

collaboration with WWD is vital to the successful employment of the population.

Keywords: individuals with disabilities, young adults, transition services, employer,

employment, occupational therapy, barriers to employment, disabilities, disability employment,

ableism, workplace, shift in work, group interventions, and labor shortage.

Introduction/Background

Shift in Workplace Culture

There has been a recent workplace culture shift in the United States due to the increased popularity of remote work post-COVID-19 (Bick et al., 2023) and a significant labor shortage. As of 2024, there are 8.5 million job openings in the US, but only 6.5 million workers are available to fill them (Ferguson, 2024). The labor shortage and lack of individuals returning to work have led to businesses having difficulties acquiring and retaining employees. The lack of a more traditional labor force could mean increased opportunities for underutilized populations, such as individuals with disabilities seeking employment (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). As employers adjust to the new work culture of the US, more research into how the shift may affect employers' perceptions of and barriers to hiring workers with disabilities (WWD) was identified as a needed area of research and possible intervention.

About Workers with Disabilities

In the United States, the estimate of the population with a disability is about 1 in 4, at about 27% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Historically, individuals with disabilities are about two times more likely to be unemployed than individuals without disabilities (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023), highlighting the urgent need for effective solutions. Despite efforts since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to increase the skills and employment experience of individuals with disabilities, the rate of unemployment remains much higher than the average population (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). The national unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities is 7.2 % (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023). The rate in Springfield, MA, is 22.8%, one of

the highest rates in the state (Executive Office, 2020). It is important to note that unemployment

rates are based on the percentage of the population actively searching for employment. This

means that only 1 of 5 individuals with a disability who seek employment in Springfield, MA,

have successfully found employment. Based on this information, the student identified an urgent

need for additional support of transition services and resources addressing employment barriers

in this community and other communities that face disparities. It is crucial to address this gap in

successful transition services as unemployment is linked to disparities in health and wellness for

all populations (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). Additionally,

individuals with disabilities deserve to have the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers,

including finishing school and going into employment, higher education, or becoming valued

members of their communities.

Barriers to Employment for WWD

This student identified many different barriers for individuals with disabilities who are

seeking employment, including ableism, prejudice, disability visibility, and disclosure. Because

of the historical stigma, discrimination, and marginalization of individuals with disabilities, this

diverse population faces many societal barriers (Dunn, 2021). The lingering stigma and

discrimination of individuals with disabilities has continued after the passage of the Americans

With Disabilities Act (ADA) (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). Ableism is a

belief that individuals with disabilities are somehow lesser and based on negative attitudes and

unconscious beliefs of people interacting with members of the disability community (Dunn,

2021). Ableism can lead to barriers to employment acquisition, maintenance, and advancement.

Some of the barriers employers face when hiring members of the population can be linked to

ableism. These barriers include misunderstanding the abilities, productivity, integration, health,

and safety of workers with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2019). With 27% of the population being

considered disabled, the chance that an employer already hires or has previously hired an

individual with a disability is high. Not all disabilities can be visually seen because while

individuals with mobility aids might be more obvious, many other types of disabilities are

invisible or not visibly apparent (Disabled World, 2023). The right to disclose or not disclose is

on the employee. Thus, the employer might not receive disclosure of a disability from their

workers, which does not give them a chance to challenge their biases on the abilities of WWD.

There is still more work to be done in educating the public and employers on disabilities and the

realities of living with one. The student conducted research to identify the lingering barriers and

misconceptions of employers about WWD and created a topic list for the expansion of the World

Seekers Program to include or address employers' barriers. This list can be found in the Leader's

Guide (Appendix C). Additionally, the student addressed self-advocacy and tools for

communicating about needs in the session interventions to support participants transitioning into

work.

Role of Occupational Therapy Practitioners

The educational background of occupational therapists is uniquely suited to help

practitioners become involved in and improve transition services (American Occupational

Therapy Association, 2020). Some OTPs have been seeking continuing education relating to

transition planning due to their lack of confidence in providing interventions for this target

population (Pierce et al., 2019). Research shows that with proper training and support, OTPs can

develop their skills and become part of transition planning, which could help address the barriers

of caregivers and students (Cahill, 2023). This empowerment of OTPs to address barriers is a

key aspect of advocating for increased OTP involvement in transition planning. There have been

studies where OTPs work one-on-one with students in transition programs to meet goals, but there are many barriers to accessing increased OT services or involvement in school districts (Pierce et al., 2019). Creating group interventions may help bridge the gaps and barriers to OTPs' involvement and will only add a little work to their high caseloads. Proposing a short trial of 6-12 weeks of sessions may be easier to gather supervisor support than advocating for longer-term changes. Additionally, presenting evidence of a previous program with positive reviews could help OTPs present more compelling evidence of their potential success in transition services and running group intervention sessions, which could add to their advocacy efforts.

Program Development & Theoretical Framework

The World Seekers program was created to support the employment of individuals with disabilities. During the planning, implementation, and evaluation of this Doctoral Experiential (DEx) program, the student created and updated a short proposal, work plan, and mind map that guided this program's creation, implementation, evaluation, and modification (Appendix D). Additionally, a mind map of the project was created using the logic model. The logic model is used to visualize the relationships between the different elements of a project (Milstein & Chapel, 2019). The logic model encourages analyzing the program from many angles to identify systemic and programmatic issues (Frye et al., 2013).

The interventions for this project were also created and evaluated based on the logic model. The theory emphasizes that it is not just how the program is formed that is important when evaluating a program (McCawly, 2021). There also needs to be a consideration of the circumstances and environment in which the program occurs (Frye et al., 2013). One of the main benefits of the logic model is that it can be modified throughout the entire program development process (Milstein & Chapel, 2019). It allows the program developer to create a general overview

of the program, who it is for, the existing barriers for the population/program, the inputs/outputs affecting it, and the expected/current outcomes (McCawly, 2021). By displaying this visually, the developer can see how the different pieces affect each other and update the visual as the program develops, when more information is gathered or researched, or when adjustments are implemented according to participant feedback. The logic model works best with teams, and as long as the researcher is aware of and plans for its drawback of encouraging linear thinking, the model can be used successfully to plan evaluations (Frye et al., 2013). This flexibility is helpful in developing new programs. However, it limits the leader's ability to evaluate the program in more effective and evidence-based ways, as the model encourages change in the program while it is being implemented. Therefore, there is not enough stability for more formal or robust evaluations. Because this DEx program faced a few barriers, using the logic model was helpful in thinking through how adaptations and modifications affected the evaluation results.

Doctoral Experiential Project Overview

World Seekers Program Development

World Seekers was a group intervention program created to address the employment barriers of individuals with disabilities seeking employment. The program's vision is that all individuals deserve the opportunity to go out into their communities and the world and find their place in it. Even individuals with disabilities should be able to seek out their place and establish connections with local communities and other desired pathways. The initial program was held for 2 hrs per week for six weeks. The sessions covered topics such as building connections, self-advocacy, safety, respecting boundaries, building collaboration and teamwork, exploring pathways, and following directions. Each session was researched and designed based on evidence and theory to support the efficacy of the sessions.

The frames of reference and models used in the creation of this project were the Model of

Human Occupation (MOHO), the Occupational Adaptation Model (OA), the Cognitive

Developmental Model, and the Person, Environment, Occupation, and Participation (PEOP)

model. More details on these models and how they influenced the project can be found in the

About Running Sessions section of the Leader's Guide (Appendix C). The reason for using so

many different models was the need for flexibility depending on session topics and to support the

program's expansion into other settings with other populations. By basing the program on so

many different models, future leaders will have increased success in implementing program

expansions.

A Leader's Guide was created to support future leaders of World Seekers groups. The

guide was designed to help leaders who might not be OTPs or OTPs who might not be used to

school-based settings. A Group Protocol Manual (Appendix E) was also created based on Cole's

7 Steps to Leadership (Cole, 2017). These steps were used to plan the group interventions and

write the manual. This leadership model has been shown to help support new leaders, and

following the steps can help increase participants' understanding, so it was chosen to help

support future leaders. Both aforementioned resources are currently being considered for

copyright.

Qualitative Data Collection

In addition to the creation of World Seekers, the student also planned, designed,

implemented, and analyzed an interview with an employer who has hired individuals with

disabilities. One of the main inspirations for this study was the Bonaccio et al. study in 2019,

which identified 11 barriers in the employment cycle affecting the hiring of Workers with

Disabilities (WWD). As work culture has shifted significantly since then, a similar study may

have revealed lingering or new barriers that current employers face. This question led to the

creation of a semi-structured, researcher-developed interview based on research and an informal

needs assessment of the perceptions and barriers of employers. Interview questions were written

to identify themes in employer perspectives of barriers, strengths, supports, familiarity with

disability, how disclosure is viewed and handled in their businesses, the knowledge and process

for accommodations, and other support systems within the businesses. The study consisted of 13

questions with probes designed to gather data on employers' perceptions and experiences of

hiring WWD (Appendix F). Recruitment consisted of distributing flyers (Appendix G), sending

emails, and advocating for employers to pass on information about the study to individuals who

might be interested in a form of snowball recruitment. One participant was recruited.

Discussion and Recommendation

Changes to the DEx Project

Before the decision to focus on group sessions, the student planned to work with the

participants one-on-one to address individual goals. However, during the informal needs

assessment, the student identified the need for a more collaborative approach to learning and

advocacy for the employment transition pathway. Switching to group interventions allowed the

student to address the participants' needs, help them practice working together with others, and

help them build skills useful in many different transition pathways. The original plan for the DEx

process involved research with the transition school students, but as they are a vulnerable

population, it would not have been easy to get Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Instead, the student focused on a research study exploring employer's perceptions.

World Seekers Program Results

World seekers received positive reviews and feedback from staff, faculty, and students at

HWRS. Though the original plan to research this population's barriers was not implemented,

surveys that did not require IRB approval were implemented to gather feedback on the program.

Through the submission of post-session surveys (Appendix H), the participants could submit

feedback on the program after each session that the student analyzed and charted in a results

table (Appendix I). On average, the sessions received 4 out of 5 stars for each session. The

participants reported on their enjoyment and understanding of knowledge gained or skills

developed due to program interventions. The student implemented this feedback to modify or

adapt the session to include more effective and engaging interventions. These activity

modifications and adaptations were used to refine the World Seekers Group Protocol Manual

(Appendix E). The manual was created to guide students and other clinicians in running the

World Seekers sessions designed in this DEx process.

World Seekers Limitations & Recommendations

World Seekers was created in a limited amount of time and has only had one complete

implementation of the group interventions. This means it is still a relatively new program that

will need more refining in the future. Additionally, the limited number of topics can only address

some of this population's barriers. Finally, the program requires an established process for

assessing and evaluating the participant outcomes to establish effectiveness and track participant

goal attainment.

Recommendations for World Seekers include expanding the program by creating group

interventions for other populations, topics, and settings related to supporting disabled transition

and employment. The Leader's Guide (Appendix C) contains resources and guidance for leaders

seeking to expand or create their own groups. Additionally, creating a resource or mini-course

for OTPs on advocating for involvement in transition services in their district would be a logical

next step. Another important recommendation is setting up a system for evaluating and assessing

the program for effectiveness and outcomes. Finally, the student recommends spreading the word

about this program or even setting up a similar group in other underserved communities and

organizations to support the development of transition support systems in local communities.

Interview Research Study Results

The participant who completed the interview was part of a company that had successfully

hired WWD for years. The figure below (Figure 1) details the main identified themes and

takeaways from the interviews conducted. These results gave the student a general overview of

the systems to support WWD in a company that has been successfully hiring WWD for years.

However, their openness, well-developed support systems, and confidence in hiring these

workers might have resulted in a bias because not all employers will have these types of systems

in place. The interviewee gave some excellent advice on how to help employers who want to

create better systems within their business to address accommodations and support WWD.

Figure 1

IDENTIFIED THEMES	
Comfort Level with Disability	➤ Lack of education and experience for managers and company leaders. ➤ Anxiety or discomfort with navigating supporting workers w/ disabilities (WWD). ➤ Inaction/withdrawal due to uncertainty and discomfort.
Collaboration with WWD	➤ The hiring manager does not need to know/do everything. ➤ Having other department systems in place to support the individual beyond the hiring manager helps to increase workers options, when possible. ➤ Be sure to collaborate with WWD to meet their needs like any other employee. ➤ Manage the person, not the disability.
Start Small	➤ When an employer is considering actively recruiting WWD, they can start with offering paid internships or trial periods. ➤ This gives them a chance to start developing the skills/process needed to hire WWD for their business. ➤ Contact local government agencies that support employment of WWD. ➤ There are many resources readily available for employers.
The WWD is the Expert	➤ The WWD lives with their disability every day. ➤ They know what type of support they need to be successful. ➤ Often can tell you the equipment or modification(s) they need to be a successful worker.
Accommodation	➤ The most common type of accommodation is flexible scheduling. ➤ Most accommodations are low cost and with collaboration the equipment is more likely to be successful. ➤ Having multiple ways to request accommodations and that allow WWD to speak to someone besides their superior. ➤ Educate your employees on the process for requesting accommodations so they know the process.
Benefits of Hiring WWD	➤ WWD are generally more loyal to companies who support them and have less turnover. ➤ There are many WWD who have developed skills and are underutilized. ➤ Many WWD are excited about their jobs and have high morale. This can be infectious and influence the other workers.
Disadvantages of Hiring WWD	➤ The Initial adjustment period can be awkward for current employees. ➤ It can take time for managers to learn how to address the accommodation process for WWD.

Study Limitations & Recommendations

One of the main limitations of my study was the limited time that for the recruitment phase. If this research were to continue, one of the main suggestions would be to have more rounds of interviews while trying different types of recruitment, such as posting flyers in local places or handing them out at events. Additionally, having a plan to recruit employers who might have had negative experiences is key. Adjusting the recruitment to target employers who might have had a negative experience and those who might have had a positive experience differently might have resulted in more interest in the study as well as more contrasting opinions. The more different types of employers the researcher can interview, the better insights they will have into the existing barriers.

Learning Outcomes

Interprofessionalism & OTP's Roles

During this project, the student learned how to successfully communicate the role of OTPs and their involvement in transition services to participants and staff at their site. Additionally, the student worked closely with the transition school teachers and staff to successfully form and run group interventions. At the end of the program, the student developed a resource to support other professionals who might be interested in leading similar groups in the future.

Conducting a Needs Assessment

A thorough needs assessment was completed (Appendix J and K) and used to form and implement a program. The student learned the different aspects of a needs assessment, the importance of considering the various levels of organizations, the stakeholders, and the site-specific barriers. The student then sought to address identified needs in their DEx project. This research opportunity was essential to

Qualitative Research and Interviews

During this project, the student researched qualitative research, thematic analysis, conducting interviews, avoiding leading questions, and limiting researcher bias. The student then designed, planned, submitted, and received IRB approval (Appendix L) and conducted a research interview study. The student gained practical experience conducting interviews and learned the importance of running mock interviews before interviewing participants. Additionally, after interviews, the student developed skills in analyzing transcripts and identifying data themes. The student then used this data to discuss themes and recommend further research.

Contributing to the Future of the OT Profession

Many opportunities to interact with, encourage, and guide the next cohort were available during the project. The student learned about and practiced their role in helping the next generation of occupational therapy students, which gave them an opportunity to discover the importance of sharing knowledge to help further the profession of occupational therapy.

Therapeutic/Clinical Reasoning

The student learned about the importance of theory and how to apply it to creating and implementing the World Seekers group interventions. When this student received feedback, they used this knowledge to develop their clinical reasoning by analyzing the participants' barriers when completing activities and how to modify or adapt them while still providing the "Just-right challenge".

Comments/Additional Information

DEx E-portfolio Link

The DEx project e-portfolio for this project has been completed and approved (Appendix M) by Dr. Debra Latour and Dr. Erin Wells. In order to access this e-portfolio with the World Seeker's Leader's Guide and Group Protocol manual, visit the appendix and follow the provided link. Additionally, the e-portfolio contains overviews of the project as a whole, additional information about the student author, and resources/materials created during the DEx process.

Creation of Additional Resources

Along with the creation of World Seekers, the student also created resources to support community connections. A list of local organizations and companies was created for HWRS to support the formation of community connections (Appendix N). In addition, resources for the encouragement of the expansion of World Seekers to other communities have been detailed in

the Leader's Guide (Appendix C), one of which is a list of ten tips to create your own local list.

The student also created a resource for WNEU Occupational Therapy Department to support the

hiring of workers with disabilities within the department (Appendix O). Finally, to support

connection between future World Seekers programs, the student created a World Seekers online

forum (Appendix P).

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Appendices Table of Contents

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Bridging the Gaps: Identifying the Barriers for Workers with Disabilities

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A Review of the Literature

Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project

Presented to the Faculty of Western New England University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Entry-Level Doctorate

in

Occupational Therapy

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by

Mary Hall

July 2024

Abstract

Individuals with disabilities face high unemployment rates due to stigma, discrimination, and systemic barriers in workplaces. Due to the recent labor shortage, the rise in remote work, and the higher expectations of workers, employers need to expand the pool of applicants they hire, including the underutilized disabled populations (Ferguson, 2024). One population that is ready for recruitment is workers with disabilities (WWD). However, employers and employees still have lingering barriers (Bonaccio et al., 2019). It is essential to support this population's employment because unemployment negatively impacts health and well-being (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). This literature review discusses the need for and justification for updating research on the perspectives of employers hiring WWD.

Key words used in literature searches included: *Employment of individuals with disabilities, employer perspectives, remote work, springfield disabled employment, demographic springfield massachusetts, labor shortage, health disparities, healthy people 2030, DEI(A), disability culture, training costs, disclosure of disabilities, employment cycle, autism stereotype employment, and wage gap disabilities.*

Introduction

There has been a recent workplace culture shift in the United States due to the increased popularity of remote work post-COVID-19 (Bick et al., 2023) and a significant labor shortage. As of 2024, there are 8.5 million job openings in the US, but only 6.5 million workers are available to fill them (Ferguson, 2024). This shortage leaves almost 2 million job positions open, and the shortage is expected to worsen in the coming years due to the declining birth rate and retirement of the boomer generation (Ferguson et al., 2023). With fewer children being born, a shift in the percentage of the working population that is older in the coming years will increase,

leaving a shortage of workers as the generation enters retirement with fewer people to replace them. Additionally, this aging population will lead to a more considerable need for healthcare-related services, but the US is already facing a shortage of healthcare workers. Among the individuals surveyed, reasons for not pursuing work included retirement (17%), refusal to work without a remote option (49 %), and the focus on skill development over work entry, which was (36%) for younger respondents (Ferguson, 2024). The labor shortage and lack of individuals returning to work have led to businesses having difficulties acquiring and retaining employees. The lack of a more traditional labor force could mean increased opportunities for underutilized populations, such as individuals with disabilities seeking employment (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020).

About 1 in 6 people have a disability worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022), which amounts to about 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the population. In the United States, the estimate of the population with a disability is closer to 1 in 4, at about 27% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Historically, individuals with disabilities are about two times more likely to be unemployed than individuals without disabilities (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023), highlighting the urgent need for effective solutions. Despite efforts since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to increase the skills and employment experience of individuals with disabilities, the rate of unemployment remains much higher than the average population (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). The national unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities is 7.2 % (US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023). The rate in Springfield, MA, is 22.8%, one of the highest rates in the state (Executive Office, 2020).

As part of the ADA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was written to address educational barriers. The IDEA rules outlined that individuals with disabilities were provided the opportunity to receive more inclusive and suitable education, leading to an increase in the skills and specialties of the population (US Department of Education, 2023). Additionally, the services to support the inclusion of workers with disabilities (WWD) into the workforce have been comprehensive, including the passage of laws, acts, tax benefits, government programs, and the creation of departments to support their employment (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). Despite this, individuals with disabilities are less likely than their peers to acquire a bachelor's degree or higher (Executive Office, 2020). However, even with college degrees, this population's employment rate is still lower than their non-disabled peers. The population is ready to work but faces many employment barriers (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). This literature review will examine the barriers and supports that WWD have when seeking employment, as well as employers who hire WWD have when employing this underutilized population.

Summary of Literature

Ableism and Prejudice

The disability community is a large and very diverse group of individuals who have a distinct culture based on common experiences, barriers, societal discrimination, and resilience in navigating a world that is not made for them (Brown, 1996). Individuals with disabilities can have a wide range of diversity, and those who identify as disabled can have many different types of disabilities, including physical, developmental, intellectual, or psychological disabilities (World Health Organization, 2022). Because of the historical stigma, discrimination, and marginalization of individuals with disabilities, the diverse population faces many barriers in society (Dunn, 2021). This prejudice against individuals with disabilities is called ableism.

Ableism is a belief that individuals with disabilities are somehow lesser and based on negative attitudes and unconscious beliefs of people interacting with members of the disability community (Dunn, 2021). Ableism can lead to barriers to employment acquisition, maintenance, and advancement. Some of the barriers employers face when hiring members of the population can be linked to ableism. These barriers include misunderstanding the abilities, productivity, integration, health, and safety of workers with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Some specific examples of ableism are discomfort with exposure to the unique behaviors or habits of individuals with disabilities that are different from the norm, the effects of social and cultural factors on the internal beliefs about individuals with disabilities, and factors such as the visibility, perceived contagiousness, and severity of the disability (Dunn, 2021). One representation of ableism that is particularly relevant to employment is the belief that some disabilities are more acceptable than others. For example, some companies sought to hire

individuals with autism based on the ableist belief that their disability was more acceptable than others because of stereotypical beliefs of their strength in certain types of tasks (Thomas, 2016).

Visibility & Disclosure

With 27% of the population being considered disabled, the chance that an employer already hires or has previously hired an individual with a disability is high. Not all disabilities can be visually seen, because while individuals with mobility aids might be more obvious, many other types of disabilities are invisible or not visibly obvious (Disabled World, 2023). Notably, about 10% of the US population has an invisible disability due to a medical condition. Because of this narrow view of disability, employers might not even realize that they already employ individuals with disabilities. Many of these individuals are often able to work without disclosure of disabilities, but it might be limiting their ability to do their best work (Von Schrader et al., 2013).

Disclosure of disabilities to employers can be a complex topic because of the stigma and discrimination of the disability population faces in daily life (Von Schrader et al., 2013). In the US, individuals do not have to inform their workplace about disabilities during or after the job application process (Job Accommodation Network [JAN], 2022). Employees are only required to disclose having a disability when requesting accommodations. However, the individual is not required to tell the employer what specific disability they have. They may, however, be required to get medical confirmation and documentation of the need for an accommodation. These disclosure protections were granted by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)(Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). Employees report fearing negative consequences such as lower work expectations, less supervision, and fear of termination if they were to disclose their disability to their workplace (Von Schrader et al., 2013). Studies have found that when

individuals with disabilities disclose a disability in applications, they receive about 26% less interest from hiring managers (Ameri et al., 2017). Additionally, hiring managers have expressed a barrier based on the lack of knowledge and experience interacting with individuals with disabilities during the hiring and onboarding process (Ali et al., 2010).

Due to the disadvantages of disclosure and the invisible nature of many disabilities, employers have limited opportunities to challenge their current perspectives about WWD. Therefore, many employers' perspectives remain unchanged, as the lack of visibility and disclosure of WWD cannot combat the historic stigma, discrimination, and lack of confidence associated with interacting with individuals with disabilities. However, the right to not disclose provides WWD with opportunities to protect themselves from negative perceptions or reactions to disclosing a disability or asking for workplace accommodations (Von Schrader et al., 2013).

Breakdown of Employment Cycle

Participating in employment involves more than just working on the job; it is a cycle that includes attracting workers, recruitment, onboarding, learning and development, reward or recognition, performance and progress in the career, and eventual retention/termination (Cox, 2018). Individuals with disabilities face barriers in many different stages of the employment cycle. In a study before the COVID-19 pandemic, 11 barriers were identified in the employment cycle, including the perceived number of individuals with a disability seeking work, the number of individuals with disabilities who are qualified, the attractiveness of job postings, the selection process for WWD, cost of accommodations, impact on co-workers, integrating WWD into the company, perception of job performance, and concerns for the occupational health and safety of WWD (Bonaccio et al., 2019).

This study was done before the COVID-19 pandemic and the huge shift in work culture the US is currently experiencing. Now that a few years have passed and the employment market is shifting, it is important to consider the barriers and support the employees and employers might still have in the employment cycle. Companies that want to hire individuals with disabilities successfully need to be aware of the employment cycle and identify where their barriers are in the cycle (Bonaccio et al., 2019). It is also important to support WWD from the start of work and then on a continuing basis, just like every other employee (Beatty et al., 2018). Recent evidence has shown that after getting hired, the support and training of individuals running human resource departments is key to helping individuals with disabilities receive the support, accommodations, and training they need to be retained.

Effects of Unemployment

Unemployment can lead individuals with disabilities to experience barriers in accessing healthcare and lead to a poorer quality of life (WHO, 2023). Unemployment has been linked to decreased health and wellness outcomes for all individuals (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). Individuals with disabilities are more likely to die earlier, develop chronic health problems, and experience occupational alienation (WHO, 2023; Jakobsen, 2004). In addition, those who do find a job often face barriers when seeking fair wages and acceptable work accommodations (Executive Office, 2020). The lack of suitable jobs, as well as historical discrimination, have led to decreased active job searching by individuals with disabilities (Ali, 2010).

Individuals with disabilities also have difficulty with maintaining support and employment. If they work and earn over a certain amount of money or work constantly for a certain amount of hours for a period of time, they risk losing their benefits (Social Security

Administration [SSA], 2024). These benefits include health care access and supplemental income, which might be needed if they lose their job. On average, a household including an individual with a disability has more expenses than the average by about approximately $18k more than those without (Morris et al., 2021). This increased cost of living is often due to the need for equipment, activity modification, support workers, and medication costs. The fear of losing these benefits often comes from the need to support healthcare costs.

Disappointment of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility

One example of efforts to support inclusive employment was the nationwide increase in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility DEI(A) initiatives implemented in many institutions and companies (Raikes, 2024). The initiatives' goals were to encourage integration and support for diversity and inclusion of minorities. However, the original programs did not commonly support increasing support for workers with disabilities and instead focused on other minority groups (Klinksiek, 2024). Though this gap in addressing disabilities has been identified, and efforts have been made to include individuals with disabilities more in these initiatives, there are many barriers, including the buy-in of managers and employees, the increased demand for knowledge, and the gathering of appropriate knowledge. However, the continuance of DEI programs and initiatives in some places is under attack. Some states have passed laws recently banning or restricting DEIA initiatives and funding efforts in companies and institutes of learning (Betts, 2024). These laws make it harder for companies in various states to support diversity and inclusion in their workplaces.

Turnover and Motivation of WWD

Research has shown that individuals with disabilities are, on average, more motivated to work and loyal to companies but are discouraged from applying by stigma, lack of suitable jobs,

and limited understanding of disabilities by employers (Aichner, 2021). When businesses need to

hire new workers due to turnover, the time and money spent training new staff is significant

(Hall, 2019). The cost of hiring a new employee can be up to a third of the average salary of the

worker being replaced. This means that a worker earning $45k would take about $15k to replace,

or about four months worth of salary. One of the benefits of hiring workers with disabilities is

that they are more likely to express wanting to continue to work for a company they already

work for as long as there are ample opportunities to grow, receive recognition, and advance in

the workplace (Ali et al., 2010).

Discussion

Unemployment for WWD

Individuals with disabilities have high rates of unemployment, often facing discrimination, stigma, and cultural barriers. WWDs value welcoming, inclusive, and flexible companies, but there are limited attractive job posts, which decreases motivation during job searches (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Unemployment is linked to poorer health and wellness for all individuals (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). However, it is especially problematic for individuals with disabilities as it can lead to decreased mental health from isolation, disparities in accessing care, and an increase in stress-related diseases. Individuals with disabilities are more likely to develop lifestyle-related diseases and face barriers to accessing healthcare services than the general population (WHO, 2023). Additionally, many individuals with disabilities have increased costs of living and healthcare than the average population (Morris et al., 2021). Even among WWD who successfully acquire employment, they face a significant wage gap (Executive Office, 2020). One of the main reasons for this is that the population most commonly works part-time or has limited hours to keep healthcare-related and supplemental income benefits to cover the increased costs of living with a disability (Executive Office, 2020; SSA, 2024).

Employers Perspectives

With the shift in work culture in the US, there have been many changes to the traditional ideas about how and where work takes place. The rise in remote work, shift in employee mindset, and labor shortage mean that the way Americans participate in the occupation of work is changing. The incentives for employers to overcome the historic stigma and discrimination of workers with disabilities are high due to the demands of the employment market and economic

benefits. With these shifts in circumstances, there is a need to research the current effects this has on employers' perceptions, supports, and efforts to integrate WWD into the workforce.

Research Suggestions

A research study examining the current employer perspectives would be beneficial to identify if there are recent changes in barriers to hiring workers with disabilities perceived by employers. Questions should identify employer perspectives of barriers, strengths, supports, familiarity with disability, how disclosure is viewed and handled in the business, accommodations, and help systems within the businesses. The study would be a semi-structured qualitative research study involving interviews of companies or employers that have either successfully or unsuccessfully employed individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by limiting the chances of individuals with disabilities to pursue work and lacking support for accommodations while working, this population group is being vastly underutilized. Due to social and cultural factors, systemic change is needed to start integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce. Members of the population have been making significant progress in building skills and acquiring knowledge required for particular types of work but have still faced record unemployment levels. There has been more openness to employing this population recently, but the lingering stigma, discrimination, and misinformation have led to continued barriers. The current shift in workplace culture and the labor shortage is a unique opportunity for businesses to adapt and modify their business to include traditionally underutilized populations. The role of OTPs in this transition can be from multiple fronts, including advocating for an expansion of our role in transition school services, educating employers and businesses on the potentials of this population, working as consultants for small

and private companies seeking support in developing inclusive processes and accommodations,

working with caregivers on understanding their role and supporting them to prevent burn out,

working one-on-one with WWD to support any barriers to positive job performance, etc.

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Appendix C

The Leader's Guide for World Seekers is currently copyright-pending. A read-only copy can be viewed through clicking the link below.

Link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IxVHUuDHnsxeJ-kxBJ2151BdkJLnlZi2-oG8TvcUiIE/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix D

This QR code will take you to the short proposal, workplan, and logic model for the World Seekers project.

Appendix E

The Group Protocol Manual for World Seekers is currently copyright-pending. A read-only copy can be viewed through clicking the link below.

Link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sQtVy75g8LmU6zqP3IkMG8KHOOQiuf0PTPNYidcQImI/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix F

Interview Questions

Interviewer script: Thank you for agreeing to this interview. As I mentioned, the information in this interview will be used to guide programming and resource creation for potential employers interested in hiring workers with disabilities. This study will also guide in building support systems, programs, and resources for workers with disabilities. In addition, this research may help to inform current/future occupational therapists on their roles in addressing barriers in the employment cycle. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. You have the right to refuse to answer questions or leave this interview at any time. As mentioned before, I will be recording these sessions, but your responses will remain confidential. Please try to be honest with your answers. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

1. What is the name of your company, and how many employees do you/your company employ?
   a. How many of them have disabilities?
2. Tell me the vision of your company and how you see workers with disabilities contributing to it.
   a. If your company did not start out hiring individuals with disabilities, has your vision changed any since hiring workers with disabilities?
3. Tell me your thoughts about the benefits or advantages to hiring someone with a disability.
   a. When you made inclusion a priority, if you did, for your company did you see any hidden benefits or encounter any unexpected barriers?
4. Tell me your thoughts about the barriers or disadvantages to hiring someone with a disability.
   a. If you had more interaction with individuals with disabilities, do you feel that would help you address these barriers?
   b. If you had access to different types of supports, do you feel this would address these barriers?
5. Tell me about your thoughts on hiring workers with disabilities for part time and/or seasonal work.
   a. Does your company currently do this? Why or why not?
   b. What disadvantages or advantages would this have for your company?
   c. What would make it easier to provide these types of positions to workers with disabilities?
6. Tell me about your experience with any legislation or laws that were helpful or detrimental to you when hiring workers with disabilities.
   a. How easy were these laws to find/understand?
   b. Is this a state or federal law?
   c. In what way did they support/discourage employing individuals with disabilities?
7. What are the most common types of accommodations at your company?

       a. Tell me about how you implemented these accommodations.

8. Tell me about a specific time you successfully accommodated an employee, if at all.
       a. What approach did you use?
       b. How did you decide on the accommodation?
       c. Was this your idea or did you receive support when coming up with this accommodation?
       d. Would you be interested in expanding to include support for physical/cognitive disabilities?

9. When you are looking to hire someone for a position, what support system do you have to accommodate workers with disabilities, if any.
       a. What are the advantages of this system?
       b. What are the disadvantages of this system?
       c. Do you think other companies would be able to use this system or something similar?

10. Tell me your thoughts on disclosure of disabilities during or after the hiring process.
       a. Do you know why some individuals are reluctant to disclose?
       b. Do you have a system for new diagnosis/updated disclosure?

11. Tell me about the work culture, such as the attitudes, values, and beliefs of employees within your workplace.
       a. How does providing accommodations affect non-disabled workers/workplace culture?
       b. Did employing workers with disabilities cause any negative effects on the culture?
       c. Did employing workers with disabilities cause any positive effects on the culture?

12. How do you encourage self-advocacy for your employees, if at all?
       a. How are these requests processed?
       b. Have they been expanded to all employees?

13. What advice do you have for other employers who are open to hiring individuals with disabilities, but don't know how to get started?
       a. What were your best resources when hiring workers with disabilities?
       b. Tell me about a resource you wished existed for employers hiring individuals with disabilities?

Appendix G

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY, OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DEPARTMENT

Addressing Employment Barriers of Workers with Disabilities: A Look at Employer Perspectives

SEEKING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS!

INTERVIEWEES WANTED:

Do you or your company employ individuals with disabilities?
Consider joining our interview study seeking to identify the supports, barriers, and solutions for successful employment of workers with disabilities. Interviews will be confidential.

PARTICIPATION DETAILS:

- Participation consists of an 30-45 minute interview via zoom or telephone.
- Some participant feedback on transcript may be requested: should take <10 min.
- Total time commitment: 45- 60minutes

BENEFITS

Help other Employers

This research may help inform other employees/companies seeking to hire workers with disabilities on the current supports, strategies, and barriers in the employment cycle.

Support Workers with Disabilities

This research may help inform workers with disabilities about barriers and supports in the employment cycle.

Further the field of Occupational Therapy

This research may help to inform current/future occupational therapists on their roles in addressing barriers in the employment cycle.

LOOKING FOR:

- Individuals 18 years or older
- Individuals who employ workers with disabilities
- Individuals who speak English fluently

Interested: Scan this QR code or email the researchers below

PRIMARY CONTACT
Mary Hall, OT/s
Mary.hall@wne.edu

FACULTY MENTOR
Dr. Erin Wells, OTD. OT/R
erin.wells@wne.edu

This study has been approved by the Western New England University Institutional Review Board (IRB).
IRB # 233

Appendix H & I

The post-session survey form and feedback chart for World Seekers is in the Leader's Manual being considered for copyright. To preview them, follow the link in Appendix C, then locate these resources in the appendix section of the Leader's Guide.

Appendix J

Needs Assessment Part 1

Transition Schools: The Supports and Barriers to Employment Post-Education

Problem or Unmet Need

Transition planning is mandated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for individuals with disabilities who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and are 16 years or older, but many states require planning to start earlier (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2023). By the time an individual with disabilities has reached this transition age, they are more likely to have been discharged from occupational therapy (OT) services. Additionally, because of the misunderstanding of the role occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) play in school settings, they are not often involved in the transition planning and process for transition-aged individuals with disabilities (Mankey, 2011). Many OTPs' role in schools is understood as working on addressing handwriting, perception, and sensory issues (Abbott & Provident, 2016). The extent of OTPs' education and role in schools can cover more than these topics, but there is a lack of therapist confidence to address transitional planning. However, there is a well-documented gap in care for these transition-aged individuals and their families when it comes to transition planning (Benson et al., 2021). Studies have shown caregiver and student dissatisfaction with transition plans due to confusion with the process, lack of resources, perceived lack of support, and limited post-school options (Cahill, 2023).

These transition-aged individuals have many options for transition pathways (Image 1). The goal of transition programs is to help the individual explore their options and what is best for them as they transition into being productive or contributing members of society (Autism

Commission, 2014). Though there are many pathways, this needs assessment focuses on

transition-aged individuals seeking employment or volunteer work post-education. Because the

individuals attending this class have different ability levels and plans for the future, any group-

based intervention requires OTPs to focus on a wide range of skills to meet goals. Currently, no

program with OTPs leading employment or lifestyle groups exists in the Hampden-Wilbraham

Regional School District. Treating in a group format allows the participants to learn how to work

as a team, to learn from each other, to develop employment and community integration skills,

and to build collaboration skills. These skills can be helpful no matter what transition pathway

they are pursuing and may lead to positive outcomes in the future with the development and
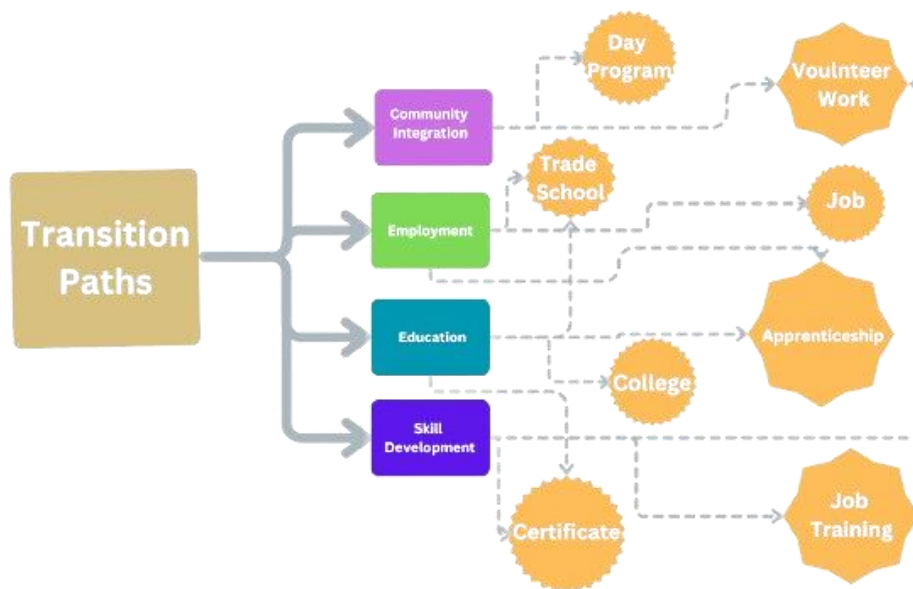
refinement of such groups.

Image 1

Target Population

In the US, about 1 in 4, or around 27% of individuals identify as having a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). The amount of individuals reporting being disabled has increased in Massachusetts these last few years, mainly due to increased reporting of children with cognitive disabilities (Executive Office, 2020). This means there is an increase in students attending transition school to continue to learn about and receive support for their post-education transition plans. All of these students have the right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). After the expansion of the IDEA, states were required to provide services to help students prepare for transition after leaving school. Still, recent studies show barriers for the students and their caregivers in receiving quality transition services (Cahill, 2023). Supported transition is essential because of the health and social disparities that the group faces due to lingering discrimination, stigma, and marginalization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Literature Review

Locally in Springfield, MA, the unemployment rate of the general population is 9.1%, which is higher than the national average of 3.5% (Executive Office, 2020, US Department of Labor Statistics, 2023). Individuals with disabilities in Springfield, MA, have an unemployment rate of 22.8% (Executive Office, 2020). This means that an individual with a disability living in Springfield, MA, who wants to work is 2.5x more likely to be unemployed than an individual without a disability. This is an issue because employment is linked to economic security and success (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). About 1 in 4 (26.6 %) individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts live at or below the poverty line, which is three

times the rate of individuals without disabilities (7.9%) (Executive Office, 2020). Though it might not be the correct path for every student, the link between employment and health and wellness has been well established (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020).

According to surveys, individuals with disabilities are less likely to possess full-time jobs, more likely to have lower representation in higher-paying jobs, are more likely to experience barriers to healthcare and work placements, and are less likely to have completed higher education than their non-disabled peers (Executive Office, 2020). This population is also more likely to develop lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and poor oral health (WHO, 2023). Helping to create interventions supports one of the national plans to address social determinants of health (SDOH). The national plan involves supporting and creating programs to increase the number of young people participating in employment to mitigate the health and social disparities outlined in the Healthy People 2030 Report.

By having OTPs contribute to and support the development of transition skills and goals, the students can develop skills they will need when transitioning into the community that they would otherwise not have developed. Adding OTPs to transition planning may create a more successful transition process that addresses the parents' and students' concerns and needs (Pierce et al., 2019). A comprehensive process for providing intervention and evaluating the motivations for occupational participation by the students post-education has yet to be established (Cahill, 2023).

There have been programs that focused on OTPs working with individuals to assess and then implement intervention for each individual based on transition goals that showed positive improvement in skills related to employment, motor skills, and social skills (Pierce et al., 2019). The study had school-based practitioners receiving weekly support and guidance to address

students' goals. However, this individualized process where therapists spend an hour a week with each student might not be suitable for all school districts due to the caseload size and the limited availability of OTPs. Creating a group program to address skills could benefit the participants in many ways, including learning about and developing social skills and soft skills like teamwork or problem-solving, which employers look for. Additionally, the program could be inclusive and bring in students from the general education classrooms in areas with high rates of poverty and unemployment, which would help address the barriers of other children in the community who might be facing barriers to health and be disadvantaged when seeking employment.

In summary, the transition services that transition-aged individuals with disabilities currently receive have many barriers and a lack of OT involvement. Successful transition programs help support health and community engagement, however, being unemployed or separated from the community can increase the chances of health and wellness disparities. Despite the existence of transition programs, the employment rate and level of education of individuals with disabilities are still significantly below their non-disabled peers. OTPs have been attempting to discover the evaluation and intervention techniques to help this population transition more successfully.

Resource Availability

In the US, individuals with IEPs are eligible for extended schooling until they are 22 years old (Autism Commission, 2014). These transition programs receive funding from the state, federal, and local government tax revenue, just like every other public school-run program in the state (Skinner, 2019). Schools have been chronically underfunded for years, meaning there are limited resources and little incentive to expand or create new roles for OTPs to be involved in the transition process (The Century Foundation, 2022). The funding that districts receive can also be

unequal depending on the location, poverty level, and ethnic distribution of the school district. Additionally, because of the small size of some of these school districts, these classes can have limited staff, students, and resource availability. These limited resources can cause the burden of setting up employment opportunities for transition school students to fall to the teacher, who is already busy creating lesson plans, teaching students of various ability levels, and working on addressing the goals of each individual student according to their IEP.

Barriers:

In an informal needs assessment, the researcher interviewed teachers, staff, students, and parents on the barriers to employment for transition-aged individuals with disabilities. The staff at the transition school communicated that it took a lot of work to maintain partnerships with local organizations and businesses due to the owners expressing concern for the productivity, reliability, and safety of these transition-aged workers. The school also expressed difficulty setting up employment opportunities for part-time or seasonal work, as employers seemed reluctant to accept anything less than full-time placement. Another barrier identified was setting up transportation during the program and post-education; this can be challenging, especially if the caregivers cannot offer rides. Transportation is a very pressing issue in Springfield, as public transit can be hard to use, is limited in where it can take people, and the high rate of crime could expose individuals with disabilities to unnecessary risk (Beyond, 2023). The caregivers expressed that they were uncertain that their family member would ever be able to work and did not know how to support them. The caregivers also communicated that they felt that the resources provided to them needed to be clearer because they could not link where their relative was at in the process to which resources would be useful. Students expressed uncertainty about what they wanted to do post-education, and there was a general lack of motivation for pursuing

employment. Additionally, the students who wanted to pursue employment chose jobs that would be difficult to acquire without prior experience working and building skills.

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Appendix K

Needs Assessment Part 2

Developing a Program Encouraging Students with Disabilities to

Pursue and Build Employment Skills

Objectives

The main objective of the program is to create a program run by occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) that helps a class develop and utilize skills related to employment, community integration, and social interactions to improve the outcomes of transition-aged individuals post-education. Additional objectives include helping transition-aged individuals improve skills related to their transition pathway and helping students develop employment or community integration skills in a collaborative learning environment. Objectives outside of the main program involve addressing the gaps in understanding for the other stakeholders or supporters of individuals with disabilities seeking employment and providing guidance for caregivers, OTPs, and transition school teachers on activities and interventions to support transition goals.

The objective of this specific intervention program is to encourage the development of skills that students with disabilities will need post-education in the workplace or community through a flexible and as close to real-world environment as possible. Supporting the development of skills in transition-aged individuals can help them to learn and develop skills they will need in later life. There are some OTPs who have been seeking continuing education relating to transition planning due to their lack of confidence in providing interventions for this target population (Pierce et al., 2019). Studies show that with proper training and support, OTPs

can develop their skills and become part of transition planning, which could help address the

barriers of caregivers and students. This empowerment of OTPs to address barriers is a key

aspect of the program. Getting OTPs involved also helps by bringing in an expert on

modification and adaptation of activities for students working toward their occupational goals

(Cahill, 2023).

The group topics will consist of activity sessions based on common topics of concern,

including safety, self-advocacy, introducing oneself to others/interviews, employment models,

commitment, professionalism, boundaries, and workplace simulations. These topics were chosen

based on an updated needs assessment, including educator feedback, informal stakeholder

interviews, and research into areas of concern for stakeholders. These stakeholders included

employers, workers with disabilities, transition school teachers, facility staff, and caregivers, as

identified in the informal needs assessment.

Role of Occupational Therapy Practitioners (OTPs)

This program was designed by an occupational therapy doctoral student. Occupational

therapists are uniquely suited to design and run this program because they are trained in task

analysis, mental health, activity modification, assistive technology, and the just right challenge.

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework 4th edition (OTPF 4) labels employment as one

of the Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs) (American Occupational Therapy

Association [AOTA], 2020). IADLs are the occupations that support individuals in their daily

life both within the home and the community. Occupational therapists are able to help design

activities at different ability levels and upgrade or downgrade activities so that the students are

being challenged at the correct level to encourage growth in skills. Currently, though OTPs work

in schools they have limited roles in working with individuals in transitions programs because

most individuals stop receiving OT services because of the misunderstanding of their role in

schools (Mankey, 2011). Current and future occupational therapists may be able to use the initial

program developed in this DEx to support the involvement of OTPs in similar programs as well.

By getting involved, these OTPs could work to expand the program to include other skills,

topics, and settings.

In addition, OTPs could address other stakeholder barriers using the program, materials,

and program feedback. This could be done in a few different ways. One example is developing

collaboration with local job coaches on the skills taught and resources used in this program,

which job coaches could utilize while supporting workers with disabilities who have gone

through this program. The OTPs could build relationships with these local organizations and

provide in-service on the resources, tools, and materials used in the groups so that support

systems of clients would have familiarity with the tools and resources provided by the program.

Another example is the creation of a handout or short course for employers the school is looking

to partner with and maintain connections with to improve the school's ability to coordinate work

placement and community interaction opportunities for the students. Additionally, OTPs could

be responsible for communicating with caregivers about the potential pathways for the individual

and providing them support when they are lost or want more information. Finally, students report

that they feel they are not involved enough in the transition process (Cavendish & Connor,

2017). With our client-centered focus, OTPs might be able to bridge this gap by assessing

interest and completing an occupational profile (AOTA, 2020). These processes could give a

voice to the students and caregivers who face barriers when contributing to transition planning

(Cavendish & Connor, 2017).

One of the models considered when developing this program was the Ecological Perspective Model, a healthcare model not unique to OTPs. The model encourages therapists to look at the relationships between the environment, policy, community groups, and the individuals. Through considering the connections and relationships between intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, the community level, institutional factors, community factors, and policy the therapist can have a clearer picture on how and where to create interventions. Additionally, considering the levels and how they interact, the changes can be designed to influence other levels. The model acknowledges that often a problem, such as the lingering stigma, discrimination, and barriers to employment of the target population, is not simple because of these many factors and perspectives to consider. The role of OTPs in the program is to identify the perspectives in their community and determine the best course of intervention for supporting transition-aged individuals with disabilities beyond direct one-on-one intervention.

Group Goals:

1. To increase the connections and support system between the transition school and community so that students have more opportunities to experience different types of work or community environments.

2. To improve related skills for individuals seeking work, volunteering, or community integration post-education.

3. To provide a resource for all stakeholders addressing barriers, misconceptions, and concerns relating to disabilities while encouraging more interaction and better understanding.

Data Collection Methods

The logic model considers the outputs and inputs a program creates and the effect they have on the individual and outcomes (Farrell et al., 2012). The model acknowledges the complexity of addressing needs and gaps in care because it is hard to control the inputs or outputs that an individual is exposed to and thus the outcome may be variable. The logic model encourages evaluation throughout a program to address the changing nature of circumstances that participants and the program might face. Thus, this model was used when deciding on the program evaluation because of program newness. By evaluating the program as it is running, regular feedback helps the leader to adjust and address any barriers that occur while the program is being run. This way there is more flexibility in the program if there needs to be any sudden changes.

Weekly post-session check-ins consisting of simple quantitative and qualitative questions will be used to gather feedback from the participants. The feedback form allows for the participants to express their opinions and give insight into what they learned each week. These will be put into a table to suggest adjustments and modification of the program for its next run. The suggestions will be used to improve the program manual that others can use to run sessions.

After further development of the program, a means to assess the participants skill gain and outcomes would be the next step for evaluation. This will help measure the effectiveness of the program and the impacts on participants. Additionally, if the program is implemented by schools, getting OTPs involved in planning and creating goals for transitions may address the need of parents or caregivers and teachers for more support (Pierce et al., 2019). Using the program resources, OTPs could create sessions for transition classes to address the various goals of the individuals.

Program Advantages

There are numerous advantages of developing a program that addresses the goals and skill development of transition-aged individuals in a group setting. Because the different members of the group all have their strengths and weaknesses and varying levels of knowledge and experience, learning in a group dynamic can help the participants to have the chance to learn and grow with each other. When an activity or strength fits their expertise, a participant can practice leadership and teaching skills while the people learning can develop their teamwork, collaboration, and problem-solving skills while developing new skills. Additionally, practicing skills in groups helps with the generalization of skills in multiple environments. The participants can support and guide each other in practicing adaptation or modification of skills in a new environment, which can be helpful when the participants may need to do this at a future job site.

Program Disadvantages

The disadvantage of developing a program that addresses transition-aged individuals' goals and skill development in a group setting is the need for more direct, targeted intervention for the participants. Because of the varying levels of abilities, addressing skills in groups could be more beneficial for some participants than others if the activity is not implemented and appropriately adjusted for the challenge level. An experienced OTP can balance the challenge for all participants, but there may not be much OT availability in school settings. Because of some school districts' location, size, or funding, OT services might be limited. Additionally, they already have a high caseload or have difficulty retaining a stable therapist (Skinner, 2019; Taylor et al., 2022). Current therapists have difficulty with the caseload they already have and express that they are not able to complete all aspects of an evaluation they would have if given more time. The Taylor et al. study also indicated a lack of time to attend IEP meetings, the need to

cancel intervention sessions to assess new students, and other signs of a high caseload. This could mean that though this program encourages school-based OTPs to get involved in the transition process, they might not have the time or resources to do so.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
● Allows participants to practice application of skills. ● Developed in a way that allows for easy adjustment of activity difficulty levels. ● Working in groups allows members to learn from and encourage each other.	● Lack of more robust program evaluation decreases the credibility of the results. ● Evaluation does not fully test participant knowledge gain. ● Low participation of employers willing to share perspectives. ● Lack of individual focus on participant goals can lead to less effective outcomes.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
● The program can be expanded to hold sessions for other schools or community groups who work with individuals w/ disabilities that are seeking employment/community integration.	● Lack of buy-in by OTPs and employment. ● Limited amount of topics/sessions currently developed. ● Death of program due to lack of interest in continuance.

● The program activities could be used by students on level 1 fieldwork placements with transition schools. ● Possible creation of a certification process that signifies completion of the program and competence in areas of concern to employers such as safety or expression of needs. ● Possibility of utilizing telehealth to guide leaders, hold sessions, or gather information on settings.	● Limited opportunity for expansion into school systems due to limited resources and lack of understanding for OTPs roles in schools (Abbott & Provident, 2016).

Conclusions

In conclusion, students in transition schools need better support to help them start working or integrating into the community post-education. This program was designed to allow these students the opportunity to develop needed skills in an interactive and as close to real life environment as possible. This needs assessment detailed why such a program is needed, the goals of the program, how data collection on the program will and has occurred, the advantages and disadvantages of the program, and a SWOT analysis considering the opportunities and threats the program will face upon expansion. Though the program took place in Springfield, MA, it is not the only place where employment of individuals with disabilities are being affected in the US, and so implementing and refining the program while expanding to other settings may result in positive outcomes.

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Appendix L

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND | **WNE**
UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE of PHARMACY and HEALTH SCIENCES

Subgroup of the IRB & Human Subjects Committee
FWA00010736 Approval Form&

Responsible Director: _____Dr. Levine _____

Title of Project: Addressing Employment Barriers of Workers with Disabilities: A Look at Employer Perspectives.

College Proposal Number: ___COP-IRB#233

_X____ This research proposal is exempt under Federal Regulation _____*45 CFR 46.104.d.2.ii*

It is deemed acceptable according to the Belmont Principles and the American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Human Participants for a period of one year.*

_____ This research proposal has undergone an expedited review under Federal Regulation _____. It is deemed acceptable according to the Belmont Principles and the American Psychological Association's Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Human Participants for a period of one year.*

_____ This research does not qualify for exemption or expedited review and will need to be reviewed by the entire board.

Signature__ _Menna Levine_
_____Date_____5/19/2024_____

Renewal requests due before ___5/19/2025_____

& Note: Authority to approve exempt or expedited research originating within the College of Pharmacy.

* Note: It is your responsibility to notify the IRB of any adverse events that occur during your research. You must also request an additional review before you introduce changes to the proposed protocol. Maintain a copy of your original application, any requested changes, and this signed approval form. You will need to submit these if you apply for a renewal.

Appendix M

I

Addressing Employment Barriers of Young Adults with Disabilities
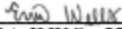
Transitioning into Community Post-Education

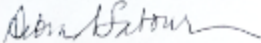A Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project

by

Mary Hall

July 2024

APPROVED BY:

_____   _____7/13/2024_____
Erin K Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR   Date
Faculty Mentor

APPROVED BY:

_____   7/14/2024
Debra Latour OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR, FAOTA   _____
Doctoral Experiential Coordinator   Date

Appendix N

Link to Google Sheets List of Connections:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Tv7tlkf9ir53m0CtDam1NBY5tRi_y_0nJlERARg98gQ/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix O

Grant Possibilities:

Grants below fix criteria:
-Available to private institutions
-May support employment of workers with disabilities or the process in someway

Grant Title	Grant ID	Due Date
PNS: Achieving Economic Mobility and Security	HHS-2023-ACL-AOD-DNCE-0030	TBA
PNS: Empowering Individuals	HHS-2023-ACL-AOD-DNSD-0016	TBA
Institute of Education Sciences (IES): National Center for Education Research (NCER): Education Research, Assistance **Important Note:** Requires Research	ED-GRANTS-052824-001	TBA
CommonWealth Corp. Grants in Employee Training **Note:** -provides funding for training, -might not apply if through WNE, but might BPC	https://commcorp.org/subprogram/wtfp-express-program/ https://commcorphelp.freshdesk.com/support/solutions/articles/44002338846-what-is-the-express-program-and-how-do-i-apply-	On-going
Institute of Education Sciences (IES): National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER): Research Training Programs in Special Education, Assistance Listing Number (ALN) 84.324B	ED-GRANTS-052824-004	Sep 12, 2024
Workplace Equity for Persons with Disabilities in STEM and	23-593	Sep 17, 2024

STEM Education **Note:** Requires teaching of a STEM in the workplace. I believe the best bet is to focus on science, i.e anatomy, physiology, etc.		
Health and Health Care Disparities Among Persons Living with Disabilities (R01 - Clinical Trials Optional)	HHS-NIH11	Sep 12, 2024
Request for Information USDOL/ILAB: Ensuring access to decent work for persons with disabilities **Note:** This one might be very promising, they are interest in new processes to support employment of individuals with disabilities. If we connect it to the university or BCP we could propose setting up a system or processes to support expansion to other universities or clinics.	RFI-ILAB-23-01	TBA
Projects of National Significance: Achieving Economic Mobility **Note:** the site says it is forecasted, but the closing date has passed. Maybe they are doing another round of applications?	HHS-2024-ACL-AOD-DNCE-0023	TBA
Occupational Safety and Health Education and Research Centers (T42)	RFA-OH-23-003	Nov 23, 2027
FY 2023 EDA Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Programs **Note:** g=Grants to areas needing economic prosperity, support programs for regional	PWEAA2023	On-going basis

specialties. From what I have learned of my time here, the medical services provided in this state are one of it's best features. May be able to apply under the idea of developing a process/ proposing an program to support integration/inclusion of individuals with disabilities into this workforce to promote growth and improvement of this system etc. However, this might be a long shot because public works is not usually something like healthcare/medical specialties.		

Potential resources:

Type of Support	Details	Link
Mass Rehabilitation Commission Massachusetts (https://rsa.ed.gov/about/states) Massachusetts-General: Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission Phone: (617) 204-3600 Toll-Free: (800) 245-6543 TTY: (800) 245-6543 Massachusetts-Blind: Commission for the Blind Phone: (617) 626-7509 Toll-Free: (800) 392-6450 TTY: (800) 392-6556	Partners with local businesses supporting employment of individuals with disabilities, but they are usually large businesses. -Might be willing to work with a university	https://www.mass.gov/mrc-employer-and-business-services https://www.mass.gov/vocational-rehabilitation https://www.mass.gov/vocational-rehabilitation-vr-for-the-blind
Work Opportunity Tax Benefit	This website details how to ask for tax benefits for hiring individuals with disabilities. -Might forward to the legal department to make sure WNE could apply. WOTC is equal to 40% of up to $6,000 of wages paid to, or incurred on behalf of, an individual who: ● is in their first year of employment; ● is certified as being a member of a targeted group(i.e. Individuals with disabilities); and ● performs at least 400 hours of services for that employer. Might supplement pay: about $5/hr minimum if I have calculated correctly, about $6.25 if they work 400+ hrs in	https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit

	that year	
Massachusetts Partnership for Transition To Employment	Lots of great resources on employment support of individuals with disabilities	https://employmentfirstma.org/mpte/
Massachusetts Start Up Resources for People with Disabilities	List of local sources supporting businesses supporting disabled employment, they might be willing to support if we hire through BPC.	https://centeronselfemployment.org/documents/state_resources/Massachusetts_Startup_Resources.pdf
Customized Employment	Western Massachusetts Employment Agency for Individuals w/ Disabilities They offer job training and resources after employment.	https://ucpwma.org/programs-for-adults/customized-employment/
Economic Development Incentive Program	Not clear whether we would be able to apply, but could make inquiries	https://www.mass.gov/info-details/economic-development-incentive-program-edip
The National Employment Team	Support for high tech accommodation needs:relating to employment	https://www.csavr.org/the-net

Appendix P

Click the link below to access the World Seekers Forum.

Link: https://worldseekers.freeforums.net/