The Importance of Employability Skills for Students with Disabilities: A Comparison of Employer and Educator Perspectives

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by

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Abstract

A misalignment exists between instruction provided in schools for students with disabilities preparing for employment and the employers' expectations for entry-level employees. Task-related social behaviors are one set of necessary skills individuals with and without disabilities need to maintain employment. This study compared descriptions of task-related social behaviors provided by employers' and educators' through an online survey. Additionally, employers' and educators' importance ratings for the same task-related social behaviors were analyzed. Results show employers and educators agree on descriptions and importance ratings for some of the task-related social behaviors included in this study and have differing opinions for others. An employee that can exhibit appropriate task-related social behaviors will strengthen coworker relationships, demonstrate personal growth, and add to business success. Results of this study may provide a starting point for restructuring secondary transition programming for students with disabilities to include more direct instruction of necessary social skills during work-based learning experiences.

Dedication

To my former, current, and future students, may you all have the skills necessary to find success.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

Obtaining and maintaining employment is a typical goal for most people in the United States, however for some people with disabilities that goal is unattainable. Despite federal laws protecting people with disabilities from discrimination when seeking employment, unemployment rates for people with disabilities remain higher than the unemployment rates of nondisabled people. While attending public schools, students with disabilities may receive specialized services to prepare them for future employment. Some of those services may include instruction of employability skills and opportunities to practice the skills in actual work settings.

Employability skills go beyond the technical skills that are required to complete specific jobs. Employers are no longer focused solely on technical skills specific to the job description; employment related social skills are a skill set necessary for employment success. Employment related social skills include the skills necessary for task completion, interacting with coworkers and customers, and other skills not related to production. The relationship between employability skills and job retention is evident in several research studies (Baer et al., 2003; Bellman et al., 2014; Mazzotti et al., 2016, 2021; McConnell et al., 2012; Shandra & Hogan, 2008; Test et al., 2009). Even though lists of the most important employability skills are available from both the employers' and the educators' perspectives, the reason behind the importance and the context in which skills are necessary remains undiscovered. Also missing is an in-depth comparison with qualitative data of the employers' and educators' perspectives of important employability skills. Finally, given the evolution of technology, knowledge, and the globalization of industry, an updated study is warranted to determine current important employability skills for entry-level

positions for people with and without disabilities to maintain successful employment (Ju et al., 2012).

Problem Statement

A connection is understood to exist between social skills and employment, however those skills related to productivity at work are less frequently included in instruction in schools (Agran et al., 2016). Research includes the employers' perspectives of the skills needed for a person to be successful in the workplace (Salzberg et al., 1986) and the education professionals' opinions of skills to be included within instructional plans (Agran et al., 2016). The existing research provides quantitative data for the educators' and employers' perspectives of important employability skills for entry-level positions. This study will analyze educators' and employers' perspectives of current important skills as well as an in-depth comparison of the context in which skills are necessary, justification of importance ratings, and potential training opportunities for students with disabilities to develop employability skills.

Organizational Context

Opportunities to participate in services and activities for preparation of future employment are available to students with disabilities throughout high school. Individualized transition services begin as early as age 14 in some states. Transition services may include work experiences, employability skills instruction, job seeking skills, and job retention skills. Participation in community-based work experiences leads to increased communication skills, ability to take directions from supervisors, and learning to work with others (Bellman et al., 2014). Participation in work experience along with competencies in academics, community living, personal-social, vocational, and self-determination skills are additional factors associated with postschool success (Benz et al., 2000). McConnell et al. (2012) completed an analysis of

literature to determine nonacademic behaviors that are linked to postsecondary employment. One of the constructs, specifically employment, found by McConnell et al. (2012) included students demonstrating job readiness skills including task-related social behaviors. One of the essential characteristics of work experience is instruction of soft skills including the following task-related social behaviors: communication with authority figures and responding to feedback (Rowe et al., 2015). Even though numerous opportunities exist for students with disabilities to participate in activities directly related to obtaining employment after graduation, task-related social behaviors are not directly taught during the opportunities (Kittleman et al., 2017).

Educators' and employers' opinions of which employability skills are most important are varied across several studies (Agran et al., 2016; Ju et al., 2012 & 2014; Salzburg et al., 1986). This study will provide a direct comparison of educators' and employers' ratings of importance for social task-related behaviors for entry-level employment in one rural community. Additionally, the qualitative data gathered through this study will determine employers' and educators' views on training opportunities for individuals to develop the behaviors as well as situations in employment settings in which the behaviors are necessary.

Existing Research

Through work experiences during high school, students develop a variety of skills beyond the technical, task specific skills such as ability to work with others, self-advocacy (Bellman et al., 2014), interview preparation, money management, and resume development (McConnell et al., 2018). Other skills mentioned in research include social skills necessary for sustained employment. Salzburg et al., (1986) found that according to employers, social skills, both related to productivity and not related to productivity, to be moderately to critically important for employment success. That study was revisited 30 years later to determine the

educators' perspectives of the skills and behaviors that are focused on in conjunction with academic instruction in schools. Agran et al., (2016) conducted a study which included the perspectives of educators regarding the importance of specific social skills and the frequency of their instruction. That study concluded that while teachers rated production-related skills as more important, they provided more frequent instruction of specific personal skills not related to job performance. Salzburg et al. concluded that employers value nonsocial, production-related behaviors, such as working continuously and arriving on time, as more important than social task-related behaviors (e.g., following instructions and providing information) and social but not task-related behaviors (e.g., using social amenities and acknowledging others), respectively. When examining frequency of instruction, Agran et al. found educators provided instruction more often in social behaviors.

Salzburg et al., (1986) examined the employers' perspectives of task-related social behaviors, social behaviors that are not task related, and nonsocial productivity-related behaviors with regard to importance for entry-level jobs. The Salzburg et al. study showed that employers of entry-level positions rated the frequency of occurrence and importance of nonsocial productivity-related behaviors higher than either set social behaviors. Similarly, educators gave the highest importance ratings to nonsocial productivity-related behaviors which are also a focus of instruction more frequently than the social behavior sets (Agran et al., 2016).

When considering the social behavior sets between the two studies, educators and employers report differing views of importance and frequency of use or instruction (Agran et al., 2016; Salzburg et al., 1986). Educators rated task-related social behaviors as overall more important than nonsocial task-related behaviors, however provided more instruction on nonsocial task-related behaviors (Agran et al., 2016). Employers rated task-related social behaviors as

more important for workplace success possibly due to the higher frequency of occurrence of such behaviors in workplace settings than nonsocial task-related behaviors (Salzberg et al., 1986).

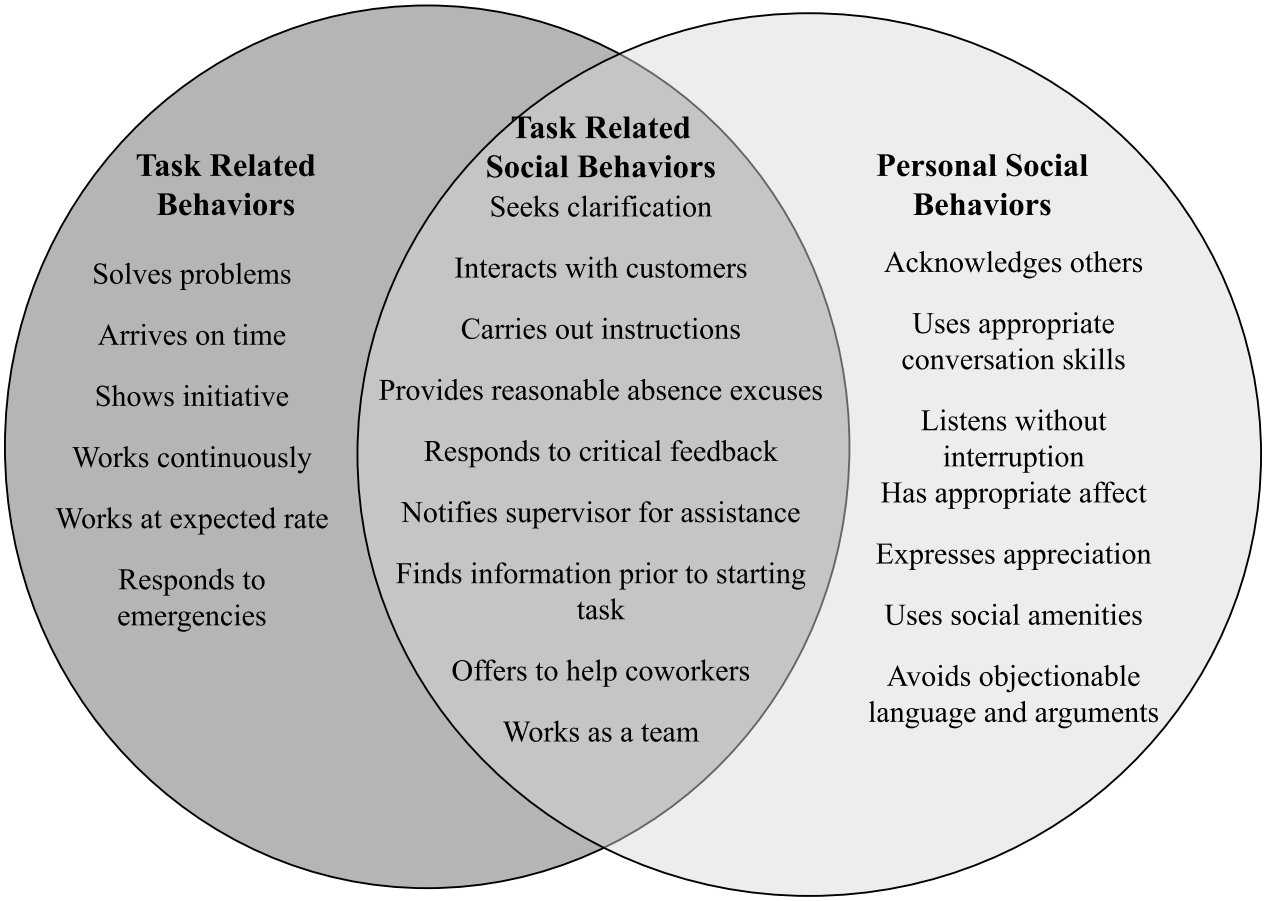
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study builds upon the foundational research of Salzburg et al. (1986) and Agran et al. (2016). Salzburg et al. identified 23 important behaviors for entry-level employment according to employers. The behaviors were categorized into three areas: (a) task-related social behaviors, (b) personal social behaviors, and (c) nonsocial task-related behaviors. Agran et al. elicited importance ratings of educators of the same 23 behaviors with some language changes and an additional seven behaviors found in research conducted between 1986 and 2016. The Venn Diagram in Figure 1 lists the behaviors from the studies.

This study will focus on the overlap area of the diagram in Figure 1. The employers' ratings of the behaviors varied slightly depending on the industry; however, overall task-related behaviors that are not social in nature were more important than the other categories (Salzberg et al., 1986). From the employers' perspectives, when considering the frequency of use, task-related behaviors that are nonsocial are most commonly needed in employment settings (Salzberg et al.). In the follow up study considering educators' perspectives, Agran et al. (2016) determined task-related behaviors were ranked as more important even though personal social behaviors were more frequently instructed. The discrepancy between employers' and educators' ratings of frequency and importance warrants a need for an updated study including both perspectives.

Figure 1

Important Employee Behaviors



Significance of Study

Workplace requirements including entry-level employability skills change over time due to progression of knowledge, technology, and globalization of economy (Ju et al., 2012; Ju et al., 2014). Additionally, the importance of employability skills is dependent on local culture and expectations (Baer et al., 2003). Therefore, a current study, limited to one locality, which examines the employer perspectives of essential entry-level skills is warranted.

The aim of this study is to compare the perspectives of employers and educators in one rural community related to the social and behavioral skills needed for success in entry-level employment positions. The data collected will provide updated importance ratings for task-related social behaviors from the employers' and educators' perspectives as well as add qualitative descriptions of employer and educator perspectives of workplace behaviors for individuals with disabilities in addition to the existing quantitative data (Agran et al., 2016; Salzberg et al., 1986). Additionally, the results of this study could affect the future format of work experience and transition programs to include more explicit instruction in the important task-related social behaviors.

Methodology and Research Questions

This mixed methods study will gather quantitative data of the employers' and educators' perspectives of the importance of task-related social behaviors for successful entry-level employment as well as qualitative descriptions of social skills and situations in which they should be applied. The perspectives of employers and educators will be gathered through online surveys to answer the following research questions:

1. How are employability skills that are task related and social described by employers and educators?
2. Which task-related social behaviors are viewed as most important by employers and educators as necessary for employment success in entry-level job positions?
3. How do the views of importance and the descriptions of employability skills differ between employers and educators?

Delimitations

This study will be limited to one rural county in Pennsylvania. The educator participants will be recruited from one school district. This study seeks to determine essential skills for success in entry-level positions so the employer participants will be limited to businesses that employ minors aged sixteen or seventeen, or people with a minimum education of a high school diploma. This study will focus on employability skills with a social aspect and are directly related to production or task completion as identified by Salzberg et al. (1986) and Agran et al., (2016).

Definition of Terms

The following educational and employment terms will be referred to throughout this study. Governmental agencies and previous studies operationalized the definitions.

Disabilities are physical or mental conditions which limit a person's ability in one or more areas including education. In this paper, ***student(s) with disabilities*** will refer to young people still enrolled in public school. An ***individual(s) with a disability*** will refer to a person(s) that has graduated or otherwise exited from the public school system. The following specific disability categories are specific groups included in prior research studies described within the literature review or possible diagnoses of students that educator participants of this study provide instruction to.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder "a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development" (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p.59).

Autism Spectrum Disorder "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by…deficits in social-emotional

reciprocity…deficits in nonverbal communication behaviors…deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships" (APA, 2013, p.50).

Intellectual Disability "a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social and practical domains" (APA, 2013, p.33).

Specific Learning Disability "difficulties learning and using academic skills" (APA, 2013, p.66). A specific learning disability can affect any or all of the following: the rate of reading, understanding meaning of what is read, spelling ability, written expression, or mathematical reasoning.

Competitive Integrated Employment is defined by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as "work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is: (a) compensated at or above minimum wage and comparable to the customary rate paid by the employer to employees without disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experience; (b) receiving the same level of benefits provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions; (c) at a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities; and (d) presented opportunities for advancement similar to other employees without disabilities in similar positions" (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d., para. 1).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) is defined by the United States Department of Education, according to the website an IEP is a "written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting in accordance with §§300.320 through 300.324" (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.320, para. a).

Least Restrictive Environment is a location in which children with disabilities are educated with children that are not disabled, to the maximum extent possible (https://www.pattan.net/Legal/Least-Restrictive-Environment)

Postsecondary typically refers to any achievement after an individual completes secondary school, or high school, in the United States. ***Postsecondary education/training*** includes 2- or 4-year college, vocational training, employment training, apprenticeship, or other licensing programs, and other training necessary for employment. ***Postsecondary goals*** are the goals included within a transition plan of IEP, set by a student and members of the IEP team in the areas of education and training, employment, and independent living.

Self-determination "the ability to make choices, solve problems, set goals, evaluate options, take initiative to reach one's goals, and accept consequences of one's action" (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 121).

Special education includes specially designed instruction at no cost to the parents to meet the needs of a child with a disability (United States Department of Education, 2017). ***Special education services*** are designed to meet the unique needs of the child with a disability and may include but are not limited to instruction in special settings, physical education, speech and language instruction, travel training, and vocational education.

Social skills are "behaviors and attitudes that facilitate communication and cooperation (e.g., social conventions, social problems solving when engaged in a social interaction, body language, speaking, listening, responding, verbal, and written communication)" (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 122).

Work-based learning experience (see also work experience) "may include in-school or after school opportunities, or experience outside the traditional school setting (including internships),

that is provided in an integrated environment to the maximum extent possible" (https://transitionta.org/topics/pre-ets/pre-ets-wble/, para. 1)

Work experience (see also work-based learning experience) "any activity that places the student in an authentic workplace and could include work sampling, job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment" (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 118).

Task-related social behaviors are "defined as social (interaction) behaviors that [are] directly related to performance of job tasks (e.g., following instructions, clarifying ambiguous instructions, providing information to other employees)" (Salzberg et al., 1986, p. 302).

Transition plan is a section to be included within an IEP by the time a student is turning 16 or younger if determined appropriate. The transition plan includes goals related to training or education, employment, and independent living skills, if appropriate, and services that will assist the student in meeting the goals (OSERS, 2020). In some states, including Pennsylvania, "transition planning begins at age 14 or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP team" (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network [PaTTAN], n.d., para. 1).

Transition programs in this paper, are the full continuum of transition services that a school entity offers students with disabilities.

Transition services are "a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability designed within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the childs' movement from school to postschool activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation" (OSERS, 2020, p. 62).

Vocational education "a sequence of courses that prepares students for a specific job or career at various levels from trade or craft positions to technical, business, or professional careers" (Rowe et al., 2015, p. 119).

Vocational rehabilitation are the "services to help persons with disabilities prepare for, obtain, or maintain employment" (Department of Labor and Industry, n.d., para. 1). In Pennsylvania, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) is the subdivision of the state's Department of Labor and Industry responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to eligible people with disabilities.

Summary

The five-chapter organization of this study includes introduction, review of literature, methodology, results, and conclusions. The introduction provides general background information and overview of the study. Chapter 2 describes the existing literature surrounding the topic. Chapter 3 outlines the details of the study design, participants, settings as well as methodology and data analysis techniques. The findings from the study are detailed in chapter 4 with connections to previous literature. Finally, chapter 5 contains conclusions drawn from the results, implications for future work experience programs, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This literature review will analyze how social skills relate to employment success, the importance of social skills within the context of business and educational settings, and the context in which students with disabilities develop and use social skills. Researchers examined, defined, and categorized skills necessary for employment success in different ways. Soft skills, employability skills, technical skills, hard skills, and job skills are just a few terms that appear in the literature. This literature review focuses on the skills needed for general employment success; skills that are important for people across all industry types and within companies from entry-level positions to senior executives. “Social skills are behaviors and attitudes that facilitate communication and cooperation” (Rowe et al., 2015, p122).

Background Information

In the United States, employment is a way of life for people that enables financial independence while providing a means to a sense of pride and high self-esteem; maintaining employment is also a pathway for social engagement and community involvement (Wehman, 2011). Unfortunately, people with disabilities have higher unemployment rates or are underemployed compared to people without disabilities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), the unemployment rate for people with disabilities in 2020 was 12.6% compared with 7.9% of people without disabilities (para. 1). In addition to higher unemployment rates, people with disabilities also report less consistent hours of employment than their counterparts without disabilities. Twenty-nine percent of people with disabilities reported working only part time whereas 16% of people without disabilities only work part time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). See Table 1 for a comparison of employment rates for people with and

without disabilities. There is a clear disparity in the employment rates for people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities. However, if a disability is diagnosed during childhood, school-aged students can participate in special education services available through the public school system -through age 21- to support employment readiness. The employment and education of individuals with disabilities are governed by specific laws ensuring equal employment opportunities and individualized education.

Table 1

Employment Statistics for People with and without Disabilities

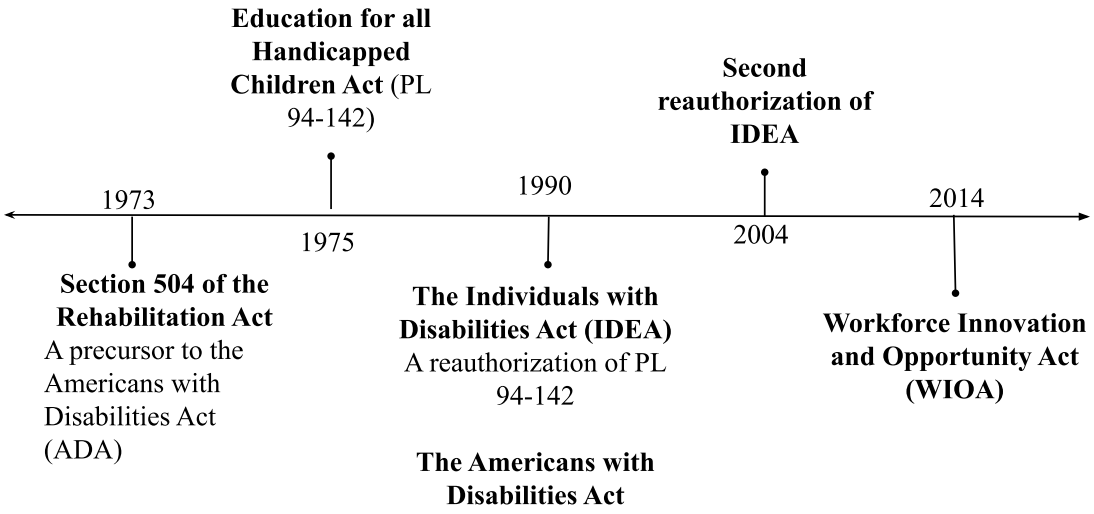
Employment Rate	People with Disabilities	People without Disabilities
Unemployed	12.6%	7.9%
Work only part time	29%	16%

Laws Pertaining to Education and Employment of Individuals with Disabilities.

There are several laws that support individuals with disabilities in preparing for and seeking employment. The enactments of new laws and reauthorizations of previous laws supporting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities span almost 40 years (see Figure 2). The three that will be discussed in this section include: The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Figure 2

A Timeline of Laws Related to Education and Employment for People with Disabilities



Based on early civil rights laws including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the ADA was signed into law in 1990 and is sometimes referred to as the equal opportunity law for people with disabilities (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d.). ADA prevents people with disabilities from being discriminated against because of their disability when seeking employment (U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). ADA also ensures that people with disabilities receive reasonable accommodations to perform the functions of the job and requires employers to provide such accommodations. Accommodations may include making facilities accessible, providing modifications to schedules, examinations, training materials, or policies. Additionally, through ADA there are tax incentives for employers to hire people with disabilities. A person with a disability will still need to possess the appropriate skills to perform a job including social skills, nonsocial production-related behaviors, and industry specific technical skills.

IDEA started in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act or Public Law 94-142, which supported the protection of educational rights for children with disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2020). Reauthorized in 1990 and 2004, IDEA ensures that all students with disabilities are offered free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment which may include employment settings for employment related transition services (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2020). Transition services are addressed for students beginning at age 16, or earlier in some states, and include individualized services and activities to prepare students for future employment via training or education required for that employment and independent living. Such services may include but are not limited to career exploration, community-based work experiences, social skills instruction, and referrals to agencies that provide employment services for adults.

WIOA was enacted in 2014 and supports individuals, including those with disabilities, to obtain employment (United States Department of Labor et al., 2016). WIOA was developed through a collaborative effort between the United States Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services to provide services and training for individuals with disabilities seeking employment as well as the businesses hiring youths and adults with disabilities. Some of those services include stronger transition services linking high school education to employment, services for individuals learning English as a second language, services for individuals entering the workforce after incarceration as well as support for families to participate in the education of their children. Vocational rehabilitation programs were also expanded through WIOA to include more youth services and a focus on competitive integrated employment.

Differences Between Federal and State Laws for Special Education. The aforementioned laws are federally recognized however state laws may differ. The United States

Congress does not have authority over education but Congress does exert authority regarding the use of federal funding (Underwood, 2017). Federal education funding must be used within the guidelines of federal regulations although states may provide regulations with more protections than federal law (Rosen, 2015). Secondary transition in Pennsylvania is one area in which the state law provides more than required by federal law. Section 14.131 of Pennsylvania school code states that students 14 years of age or older have a transition plan in the IEP which includes goals for postsecondary education or training, employment, and independent living, as needed (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009). Pennsylvania school code differs from Part 300 of IDEA federal regulations, which states transition services first be included in an IEP at age 16 or younger if the IEP team deems necessary (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009). Pennsylvania is not the only state to require transition planning sooner than mandated by federal law. Suk et al. (2020) determined that more than half of states and territories require transition planning to begin earlier than age 16. Additionally, Suk et al. propose that the next reauthorization of IDEA align with best practice and require all transition plans to begin by age 14.

Difference in Legal Definitions of Disabilities. Disabilities as a single term can have many meanings and interpretations. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) website, a child with a disability is “a child evaluated in accordance with §§300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to … as ‘emotional disturbance’), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services"

(https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/a/300.8, para. 1). The United States Department of Labor defines, on their website, a person with a disability as "someone who (1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more 'major life activities,' (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment" (www.dol.gov, FAQ section). The IDEA definition includes specific diagnoses that can be found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association yet the ADA definition is not as specific. The ADA states that a disability must limit major life activities including "caring for one's self, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, performing manual tasks, and learning" (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2006, para. 3). IDEA limits disabilities to certain conditions defined by the American Psychiatric Association but the ADA encompasses any condition that affects typical life activities. In order to qualify for special education services in the public school system, a child must meet the IDEA definition of having a disability, however when the child exits the public school system the ADA definition applies. For a person to be eligible for adult services available to people with disabilities, the condition must meet the terms of the ADA definition.

Opportunities for Students to Develop Employability Skills

One set of activities available to youth includes work-based learning experiences (WBLEs) which can include a number of options for students with and without disabilities to learn about career options and develop skills necessary for employment. Rowe et al. (2015) define work experience as "any activity that places the student in an authentic workplace and could include work sampling, job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and paid employment." (p.118). Some of the characteristics of work experiences include instruction in soft skills, obtaining and maintaining a job, job performance evaluations, age-appropriate vocational

assessments, and others. Employment experiences in authentic settings facilitate skill acquisition, increased knowledge of worksite expectations, and awareness of career opportunities (Luecking & Crane, 2020). Classroom instruction can provide necessary skills for employment and opportunities for practice can be offered within school settings; however, students with disabilities may need the authentic settings to transfer the skills to workplace settings (Cook, 2002). Work-based learning opportunities can increase the likelihood that students with disabilities will develop the necessary skills for employment.

Cease-Cook et al. (2015) suggest work-based learning experiences should be provided as early as middle school beginning with career exploration and job shadowing, early high school years should include job sampling and service learning, and the last year of high school should include internships, apprenticeships, or other paid work experiences. This continuum of services begins with self exploration to determine personal strengths and abilities then moves to career exploration to consider various careers that match personality traits and concludes with career planning and management to understand full participation in a work setting. With a focus on preparation for eventual employment, natural opportunities will occur for students to develop and practice employment skills throughout the last years of public schooling. With full participation in work settings supported by the school personnel, students with disabilities may experience the benefits of work-based learning, including task-related social behaviors. Cease-Cook et al., describe different options for work-based learning opportunities for students. It is noted that students can use job shadowing, job sampling, and service learning as opportunities for career exploration whereas internships, apprenticeships, and paid work all offer more time in a workplace setting. The short-term options are great for students with disabilities to learn about different career choices and the long-term options will give the students

opportunity to spend meaningful time in the workplace to develop required skills and learn various aspects of a job that may not be revealed during a shorter time in the workplace setting.

Industries that Often Employ Individuals with Disabilities

In an analysis of the 2008 Office on Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) Survey of Employer Perspectives on the Employment of People with Disabilities, it was noted that service industries are more likely to hire individuals with disabilities than goods-producing industries (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). This study compared the leisure and hospitality industry to others with regard to variables that might encourage or discourage a business to hire an individual with a disability. Results showed that only companies in the information services industry were more likely than companies in the leisure and hospitality industry to hire individuals with disabilities; all other industries were less likely to hire an individual with a disability. Service producing companies are generally more likely than goods producing companies to hire an individual with a disability and service producing companies that require direct interactions with customers are likely to cite customer attitudes as concerns for hiring a person with a disability (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015). By nature, the service producing industry requires a certain level of customer interaction therefore it can be concluded that appropriate social skills are necessary for employment; otherwise employers would not cite concerns of customer attitudes as reasons for not hiring a person with a lack of social skills possibly due to a disability (Houtenville & Kalargyrou, 2015).

No matter the type of business, goods- or service-producing, the best job match will consider the specific abilities of an individual with a disability as well as the needs of the business. There are several factors noted by Wehman (2011) to increase the employment of individuals with disabilities. Person-centered planning and support of self-determination, a focus

on integrated employment, expanded relationships with businesses, maintaining focus on the outcome, and providing funding for the expected outcomes are the main factors noted by Wehman for systems change to increase employment of individuals with disabilities. When individuals are encouraged and supported to seek employment in a field of interest and funding sources are directed towards competitive integrated employment, the likelihood of sustained employment increases. Additionally, when businesses directly experience the benefits of hiring an individual with a disability, the possibility of the business hiring other individuals with disabilities also increases (Bellman et al., 2014).

Work-Based Learning Experiences Overview

There are numerous benefits students with disabilities can gain from participation in work-based learning activities. Students who participate in work experiences in high school are more likely to attain employment after high school (Baer et al., 2003; Bellman et al., 2014; Benz et al., 2000; Hasazi et al., 1989; McConnell et al., 2012; Test et al., 2009). Work experiences during high school have also led to employment with fringe benefits including paid time off and health care (Baer et al., 2003; Hasazi et al., 1989). Additionally, when students are provided the opportunity to develop necessary workplace skills prior to entering the workforce, they are more likely to maintain successful employment (Hemmeter et al., 2015; Lee & Carter, 2012, Mazzotti et al., 2016, 2021; McConnell et al., 2012).

Work Experiences Predict Employment

Researchers have identified predictors of postsecondary employment success through numerous studies conducted over several decades. An early study examined the correlation between student leavers from Vermont schools in 1985 with the outcomes two years later (Hasazi et al., 1989). The results of that study showed that two years after graduation a significant

number (79%) of students with disabilities who participated in work experiences during high school were employed, compared to the 39% percent employment rate for students who did not participate in work experiences. Hasazi et al. (1989) also indicates that the group of students surveyed that did not have a diagnosed disability did not have a significant correlation between work experiences in high school and post high school employment. This suggests that students with disabilities that participate in work experiences during high school are more likely to maintain employment in the years following high school. Also, students with disabilities have a greater benefit of participation in work experiences than students without disabilities.

Post-high school employment is linked to different high school program options including vocational education, paid work experiences, work study, and occupational programming. Students with disabilities who participated in vocational education and community-based paid work experiences within the last two years of high school report better postsecondary employment outcomes (Benz et al., 2000). Baer et al. (2003) examined predictors of full-time employment after high school and showed the following variables as most often associated with obtaining full-time employment: living in a rural school setting, having a diagnosis of learning disability, and participation in both work study and vocational education. Additionally, Rabren et al., (2002) conducted a study with high school graduates from 1996-2000 in Alabama noted that students with disabilities were more likely to be employed one year after graduation possibly due to participation in an occupational preparation program requiring 540 hours of paid employment during the final year of high school.

Baer et al. (2003) found significant correlations between rural settings and work experiences in high school and employment after high school. Rural areas sometimes have a stronger focus on work after high school rather than continued postsecondary schooling. That

focus may be the reason rural areas show stronger links between high school work experience and postschool employment. Alternatively, urban and suburban areas are more focused on academics with less opportunity for work-based learning experiences which could be the reasoning for the higher levels of employment in rural areas following high school graduation (Baer et al., 2003). This study demonstrates that local culture and expectations are considered when developing high school transition programs.

McConnell et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis which found that employment behaviors and work-based learning experiences during high school increase the likelihood of individuals with disabilities participating in full-time employment after high school. Employment behaviors include a desire to obtain a job, getting along with others, and actively seeking a job. Work-based learning experiences include internships, paid employment, vocational education, and other experiences in which students learn in work settings.

Work experiences in high school lead to an increased likelihood of full-time employment with benefits such as paid time off and health insurance after high school. One study examined National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 data for participation in school-based programs and work-based programs (Shandra & Hogan, 2008). Cooperative and vocational education programs, school-based enterprises -including school stores and technical preparation- are some examples of school-based programs. As mentioned previously, work-based learning programs include short term and long-term activities within workplace settings, for example job shadowing, internships, and mentoring. The results of Shandra and Hogan show that for students with disabilities, work-based programs, specifically mentoring and internships, increase the likelihood of jobs with benefits including paid sick leave time and health insurance.

In systematic literature reviews considering correlational research from 1984-2019, Test et al. (2009), Mazzotti et al., (2016), and Mazzotti et al., (2021) identified factors of instruction occurring in school that were indicators of achievement of postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Initially, sixteen predictor categories were indicated by Test et al. (2009) including:

> career awareness, community experiences, exit exam requirements/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, interagency collaboration, occupational courses, paid work experience, parental involvement, program of study, self-advocacy/self-determination, self-care/independent living, social skills, student support, transition program, vocational education, and work study. (p. 170).

Using the National Longitudinal Transition Study - 2 (NLTS2), Mazzotti et al., (2016) strengthened the research base for nine of the initial sixteen predictor categories and identified four new predictor categories. “Career awareness, exit exam/high school diploma status, inclusion in general education, paid employment/work experience, parent involvement, self-care/independent living skills, social skills, vocational education, and work study” were among the nine strengthened categories (Mazzotti et al., 2016, p. 203). The four new predictor variables identified were, “parent expectations, youth autonomy, goal setting, and travel skills (Mazzotti et al., 2016, p.212).

Mazzotti et al. (2021) conducted a follow up to Test et al., (2009) and Mazzotti et al. (2016). In this most recent systematic literature review to determine predictors of postschool success, previous predictive factors were again strengthened by additional correlational research studies and new predictive factors were identified (Mazzotti et al. 2021). Two of the three new factors identified are aspects of self-determination including psychological empowerment and self-realization and the third new predictive factor is technology skills (Mazzotti et al., 2021).

Researchers continually identify social skills as a promising predictor of postschool education and employment. Continued research is needed to determine which specific skills employers value and how students develop and practice such skills for long term postsecondary employment.

Specific Work Experience Programs

Per federal and state law, transition programming is individualized for each student based on interests, abilities, strengths, and future goals. A variety of programs exist to focus on job development skills including resume writing and providing job shadowing or coaching. Other programs provide assistance in understanding what agencies are available for future support (Hemmeter et al., 2014). Still others are very specific and highly structured programs that have demonstrated success with certain groups of students within specific areas of the country. Bridges From School to Work and Project SEARCH are two such highly structured programs replicated in many areas.

Project SEARCH is a business-led program in which students with disabilities participate in classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on learning entirely within a workplace setting for their final year of high school (Luecking & Crane, 2020). Project SEARCH began in Cincinnati and expanded to locations around the world. Key aspects of Project SEARCH include invested businesses as host sites, partnerships between vocational rehabilitation services, schools, and the host businesses. Employer satisfaction with Project SEARCH teams is very high due to the benefits of employing Project SEARCH interns for specific tasks that meet needs of businesses that had been previously unmet due to lack of available staff (Müller et al., 2018). Project SEARCH interns were able to complete data entry tasks that had been backlogged as well as ongoing office maintenance. Results of the Müller et al. (2018) study should be viewed

with caution due to the less than 50% response rate that could be attributed to only satisfied businesses responding.

Bridges from School to Work, referred to as Bridges, is another specific program developed by Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities, which provides skills assessments, job development, paid internships, and eventual job placement (Luecking & Crane, 2020). Bridges reports up to 90% job placement upon completion of the program due to particular attention to staff development, disability awareness training, and belief that all youth have the ability to work. The Bridges program primarily operates in urban areas with 90% of the participants being members of racial or ethnic minority groups. Hemmeter et al. (2014) completed a study to determine the long-term benefits of participation in the Bridges program. The results show that when a student participates in Bridges, they are more likely to have a higher income than their counterparts that did not participate in the program. The Bridges program maintains successful outcomes through its employer driven focus (Hemmeter et al., 2014). When a work experience program is mutually beneficial for the student and the employer, individuals with disabilities are able to gain work skills and businesses are able to fill positions with individuals that enjoy their job which often results in lower turn-over rates for businesses.

Luecking and Crane (2020) also examined a Transition Service Integration Model (TSIM) approach. The goal of this program is a business, school, and vocational rehabilitation partnership in which students' last year of high school provides a seamless transition to the first year post high school. This program claims no difference between the last day of public school and the first day after exiting public school. Students' last year of high school, therefore, leads to full-time employment where they participated in work experience throughout the last year of schooling. They are employed the day after they graduate. The TSIM approach to transition

includes person-centered planning, individualized paid work opportunities, and interagency collaboration.

Components of Work-Based Learning Experiences

Lee & Carter (2012) outlined elements of effective employment preparation programs for students with high functioning autism spectrum disorders; however, many of the components are transferable to other disability categories. The seven factors included individualized services based on strengths, early work experiences, interagency involvement, family support, encouraging independence, instruction of social and employment-related skills, and job-related supports (Lee & Carter, 2012). Studies have shown that participation in vocational training and work experiences increase the likelihood of full-time employment with benefits (Hemmeter et al., 2015; Shandra & Hogan, 2008).

Creating Work-Based Learning Opportunities for Students

Choiseul-Praslin and McConnell (2020) outlined six steps for creating work experiences for students with significant disabilities including interagency collaboration, training for staff, scheduling with regard to additional services students might require, skill acquisition, data tracking, and student monitoring. However, within the step of skill acquisition, "workplace social skills" are not specified. Prior to Choiseul-Praslin and McConnell's article, Livelli (1999) described steps for creating business partnerships and implementing a community-based vocational training program where students were paid based on "percentage of appropriate work behaviors displayed" but, again, specific descriptions of appropriate work behaviors were not included (p.48).

When students participate in unpaid internships through partnerships between schools and businesses, it is required that training is aligned with education and tied to formal

educational experience (United States Department of Labor, 2018). Riesen et al. (2021) outline methods for creating partnerships between schools and businesses for internships, following the Department of Labor guidelines, for establishing unpaid internships. However, they do not mention specific skills which should be included in the instructional portions of internships.

Students who exhibit challenging behaviors in school may have fewer opportunities to participate in work-based learning experiences out of concern that the behaviors will carry over to the workplace. A study recommended that function-based behavior assessments be utilized for students exhibiting inappropriate workplace behaviors during work-based learning experiences (Kittelman et al., 2018). The function of a behavior is the reason that a person performs a behavior. For example, the function of the behavior of a person tapping someone on the shoulder is to gain the person's attention; however, it may not be a socially accepted means to gain attention. By examining the function of the behavior, employment specialists or teachers facilitating work-based learning experiences can assist the individual with a disability in developing an appropriate behavior that is both suitable for the situation and provides the same function. In the previous example, calling out the person’s name may be a more socially acceptable behavior to achieve the same function (gaining a person’s attention). Due to the connection between social skills and successful employment, interventions and instruction provided prior to entering workplace settings would be beneficial for students that lack appropriate workplace behaviors. However, Kittelman et al., (2018) did not include information regarding specific behaviors that should be directly addressed during work-based learning experiences.

Skills Gained through Participation in Work-Based Learning Experiences

Some studies include specific lists of behaviors necessary for employment (Agran et al., 2016; Burton et al., 1987; Ju et al., 2014, 2012; Salzburg et al., 1986); yet other studies suggest that work experiences are beneficial for students with disabilities to develop necessary skills but do not include any defined lists of skills (Choiseul-Praslin & McConnell, 2020; Kittelman et al., 2018; Luecking & Crane, 2020). It can be inferred that necessary employment skills will vary depending on place of employment, hiring personnel, and the potential employee.

Skills Gained from the Student Perspective

Bellman et al. (2014) explored students' perspectives of skills gained through participation in paid internships. The study examined a variety of work-based learning experiences in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers. This study included students with a range of academic abilities and ages from high school to graduate levels. The student interns with disabilities reported a number of outcomes as a result of the internship including increased motivation to work towards a career, knowledge about workplaces, increased ability to work with others, and self-advocacy skills. This study did not mention specific disabilities other than deaf or hard of hearing. Additionally, the amount of time students participated within the community experiences was not specified; however, it was noted that if businesses would provide short opportunities such as job shadow or mock interviews, they were more likely to offer longer term work experiences and internships. Other than the Bellman et al. report, there are limited studies describing the students' perspectives of work skills.

Tymon (2013) conducted a study with university students in the United Kingdom (UK). The students' perspectives align with the literature in that communication, team work, information technology and planning, and organizing are commonly listed as important

employability skills; however, it is also noted that there is not a widely accepted definition of employability skills or the ranking of their importance. The Tymon study was conducted with first, second, and final year undergraduate students in a UK university. Since the study was conducted with university students, it is presumed that the students would have more education than a high school diploma and therefore be seeking jobs that require a higher level of education. This study did not mention if the students had a disability or were typically developing.

Some work experience programs provide additional instruction beyond specific on-the-job skills instruction. One community-based work experience program, piloted with students with autism or intellectual disabilities, enabled students to participate in learning activities to improve future competitive employment including interview preparation, money and banking, and resume development in addition to employment activities (McConnell et al., 2018). This pilot program took place during the summer since many students with autism or intellectual disabilities do not have the same opportunities for employment experiences as their nondisabled counterparts. The program also included explicit instruction and opportunity for practice job seeking skills in actual job settings. Following participation in this program, students reported increased abilities in preparedness for working, budgeting, searching for jobs, completion of applications and interviews for jobs (McConnell et al., 2018).

Uetz (2011) examined “job related field experiences" in relation to confidence in ability to perform job seeking tasks. Students with disabilities and their teachers completed pre- and post- surveys regarding confidence levels for job seeking tasks. After participating in various field experiences including obtaining, completing, and returning job applications for local businesses, students and their teachers noted more self confidence in job attainment skills. Teachers’ and students’ ratings were similar on the pre-survey indicating teachers’ awareness of

students' abilities. Teachers' ratings were higher than students' ratings for the post-survey indicating teachers presumed students gained more confidence following the field experiences than students indicated on self-reflection. The Uetz study indicates students with disabilities may need more instruction and opportunity for practice of job skills than teachers provide.

The social skills needed to participate in workplace settings may be of equal importance to the technical skills and abilities to complete job tasks. Students gain social interaction skills when given the opportunity to develop social relationships outside of the school setting when participating in a structured work experience program within the community setting (Taylor et al., 2004).

Necessary Employment Skills from the Employer and Educator Perspective

Salzburg et al. (1986), outlined behaviors that contribute to entry-level employment success. These behaviors are categorized into three groups: nonsocial production-related, task-related social behaviors, and personal social behaviors that were not directly related to tasks and production. This study examined the employers' perspectives for five specific job titles including janitors, maids, dishwashers, food service workers, and kitchen helpers. Salzburg et al. (1986) found that behaviors related specifically to production were rated by employers of entry-level positions as "more important" than production-related social behaviors and personal social behaviors. This finding is different from Burton et al. (1987) which found that personal and social skills as well as attitude were most frequently rated as most important by employers. Job developers in Singapore evaluated attitude, dependability, stamina, flexibility, and communication as important skills for job seekers with disabilities (Scheef et al., 2019). The differences in findings among similar studies indicate a need to determine the current importance, according to employers, within a local community regarding employability skills for

people with disabilities within that community. Additionally, a comparison between employers' and educators' perspectives is needed to identify any possible discrepancies and develop transition programming that will ensure students with disabilities are properly prepared for employment in their surrounding community (Burton et al., 1987).

As a follow up to Salzberg et al. (1986), Agran et al. (2016) used the same categories of employee behaviors to determine educators' perspectives of perceived importance and the frequency of instruction. Agran et al. found similar results to Salzberg et al. in the perceived importance of social skills for employment when comparing educators' perspectives with employers'; however, the frequency of instruction reported by educators did not match the perceived importance. Meaning, skills that educators indicated as important for employment were taught less frequently than skills that were deemed less important for employment success.

Differences in Expectations and Opportunities for People with and without Disabilities

Educators' and employers' perspectives with regard to frequency and importance of employment behaviors were also evaluated with consideration given to comparing people with disabilities and people without disabilities. Ju et al. (2012) found employers' view four specific skills as necessary for all employees regardless of disability status including personal integrity/honesty, ability to follow instructions, show respect, and be on time. The fifth most important skill is where employers' opinions differ between employees with and without disabilities (Ju et al., 2012). For employees with a disability, safety was rated as important whereas ability to read with understanding was rated more important for employees without disabilities. In a follow up study that included the educators' perspectives, Ju et al. (2014) found that regardless of disability status, punctuality, respect, integrity, and ability to follow instructions were the top rated skills by both educators and employers. Again, the educators' and

employers' opinions differed on the fifth most important skill. Educators indicated seeking help was important for individuals with disabilities but regard for safety was the employers' fifth most important skill for individuals with disabilities (Ju et al., 2014).

Prior to securing employment, an employer must first select an individual for such employment. When considering job applicants, employers and employment counselors evaluated the qualities, skills, and abilities that are sought in youth job applicants (Lindsay et al., 2014). This study indicated that when job applicants were well prepared for an interview and could discuss their strengths and limitations, they were more likely to be hired; however, youth with disabilities typically have less opportunity to practice interview skills and overall, less work experience. Even without previous work experience, youth with and without disabilities are encouraged to develop work habits through attendance at school or volunteer opportunities. Employers that typically hire young people do not expect to hire individuals that have the technical skills for the specific job because of previous experience, rather they look for reliability and punctuality which could be demonstrated through volunteer opportunities (Lindsay et al., 2014). Finally, a good attitude, motivation to work, and good communication skills were indicated as the most sought soft skills for entry-level positions typically filled by young people. Youth with disabilities are often viewed as lacking in one or more of those qualities and therefore less likely to be given employment opportunities. There is a societal perception of people with disabilities as people that are unable to perform given tasks. When an employer will take the time to find employment tasks that are suited for an individual rather than finding the right person for a pre-existing job description, an employee can contribute to a work environment and be more committed to succeeding in the workplace (Lindsay et al., 2014).

Community-based work experiences are widely considered beneficial for students with disabilities to obtain long term job outcomes. Paid and unpaid experiences are considered best practice for transition programs. In one survey of teachers' perspectives regarding the ability of hypothetical students to work, Cook (2002) found that teachers generally thought the described student possessed the abilities that matched the job description. This study suggests that teachers generally hold high expectations and perceived ability to work for students, therefore special education teachers will encourage students with mild disabilities to establish challenging goals. The Cook study described hypothetical students and situations therefore results are not conclusive as teachers could rate actual students differently.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this convergent mixed methods study is to determine specific task-related social behaviors that are considered important by employers and educators within a rural county in Pennsylvania. The study will analyze numerical ratings of perceived importance of workplace skills as well as qualitative descriptions and explanations from the perspectives of the two participant groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Gathering employers' and educators' perspectives will provide an opportunity to compare the two groups' understanding of necessary employability skills. Existing research demonstrates a disconnect between the employers' and educators' perception of important skills as well as when and how instruction of social skills is provided for individuals with disabilities. Various social skills are necessary in workplace settings for employees to interact with employers, coworkers, and customers to fulfill job requirements.

Research Questions

1. How are employability skills that are task related and social described by employers and

educators?

2. Which task-related social behaviors are viewed as most important by employers and educators as necessary for employment success in entry-level job positions?
3. How do the views of importance and the descriptions of employability skills differ between employers and educators?

Need for the Study

Previous literature includes perspectives of employers (Salzberg et al., 1986) and educational professionals (Agran et al., 2016; Cook, 2002) with regard to frequency, instruction, use, and importance of workplace skills. Explanations are needed for reasoning of why behaviors are important and in what circumstances (Ju et al., 2012). Additionally, necessary skills for entry-level employment success may change over time therefore an updated study is needed.

Employment outcomes after high school are directly related to participation in high school programs that engage students in work experiences. Rabren et al. (2002) suggested research is needed to determine how other program factors, for example, inclusion of work-related social skills, could affect employment outcomes. This study will add to the literature base regarding task-related social behaviors including the importance of the behaviors and how the behaviors are defined by employers and educators.

Summary

People with disabilities are underrepresented in the workforce despite legislation to support employment. Schools are legally required to provide transition services to assist students with disabilities in attaining postsecondary goals including employment. There are various opportunities for students to participate in work-based learning to increase employability skills including task-related social behaviors. This study will determine specific task-related social

behaviors that employers and educators perceive as important with regard to obtaining employment after high school. Additionally, this study will provide ratings of importance and descriptions of task-related social behaviors from the perspective of employers and educators. A comparison of the two participant groups will highlight any discrepancy and analysis of the data will provide specific task-related social behaviors of which direct instruction should be included in transition programs for students with disabilities.

The following chapter will describe the details of the study, methods for participant selection, settings for the study, and data collection. Information is also included about the timeline and researcher's role in the study. Data analysis techniques are described including specific steps of analysis and software information. Finally, methods for sharing the results with stakeholders and other potentially interested parties as well as study limitations are discussed.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Overview

This study examines the perspectives of employers and educators when considering task-related social behaviors necessary for employment success in entry-level positions. Employers including supervisors, managers, and other team leaders for entry-level positions rated the importance of previously identified task-related social behaviors and had the opportunity to describe the skills from their point of view. Current educators including special education, general education teachers, administrators, and other professional staff members were invited to rate their perceived importance of the various skills necessary for employment in addition to having the opportunity to describe the task-related social behaviors and provide justification for their importance ratings.

Research Design

This study evaluated and compared the opinions of employers and educators with regard to the importance of task-related social behaviors necessary for entry-level employment. All participants were asked to rate their perceived importance of 14 of task-related social behaviors on a Likert scale from 0-5 (Agran et al., 2016; Salzburg et al., 1986). Labels were provided for 0- not important for employment success and 5 - essential for employment success. Additional comments were requested from educators and employers with justification for the rating and description of the behavior from the perspective of the educator or employer. Additionally, participants ranked the three most important and the three least important task-related social behaviors.

When rating frequency of instruction, educators provide instruction more often for personal social behaviors than task-related behaviors regardless of if they are social or nonsocial (Agran et al., 2016). However, employers rated both social and nonsocial task-related behaviors as more important than personal social behaviors (Salzberg et al., 1986). There is misalignment between the frequency of instruction within schools and the perceived importance of employability skills in the workplace. The misalignment could be due to educators' belief the personal social skills were easier to teach or the specific students did not require direct instruction of production-related skills (Agran et al., 2016). The current study directly compares the perceptions of educators' and employers' ratings of importance of task-related social behaviors as well as qualitative data with explanations of justification of the ratings and descriptions of the task-related social behaviors from the educators' and employers' perspectives. This study compares the two groups' viewpoints within one rural area in Pennsylvania.

Institutional Board Approval

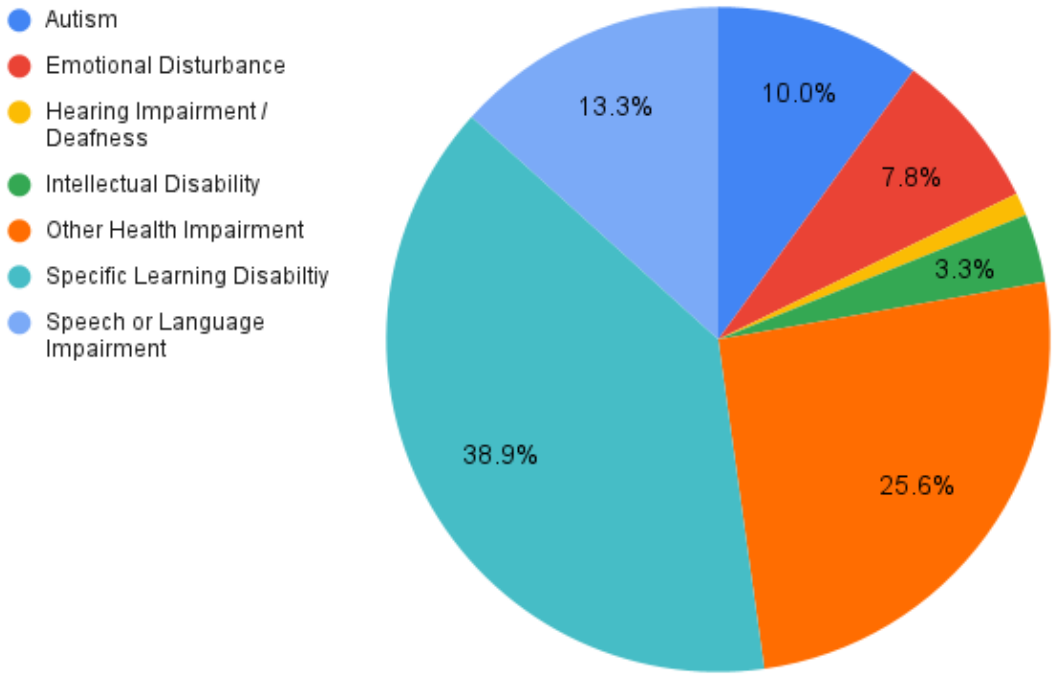
The researcher applied for approval from Slippery Rock University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Research Involving Human Subjects to conduct this study. The application process included providing details regarding the settings, participants, timeline, researcher's role, data collection and analysis techniques, and protections of confidentiality to a board of individuals for approval to conduct the study. The board reviewed the application which contains an overview of the study and details of human subjects protections occurring throughout the study. Additionally, the board examined materials used for participant recruitment and data collection and analysis for the determination to approve the study. IRB approval from Slippery Rock University was obtained prior to conducting any research (see Appendix A).

Settings

The study took place in one school district and a local business in the surrounding community within a rural county in Pennsylvania. The district encompasses 300 square miles with an average enrollment of 1,800 to 2,000 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade, with approximately 15% of the students receiving special education services. Students are diagnosed within a disability category outlined in IDEA. Some students have been identified with more than one disability category. The percentage breakdown of the primary, secondary, or third disability category for transition aged students in the district is as follows: autism (10.0%), emotional disturbance (7.8%), hearing impairment including deafness (1.1%), intellectual disability (3.3%), other health impairment (25.6%), specific learning disability (38.9%), or speech or language impairment (13.3%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

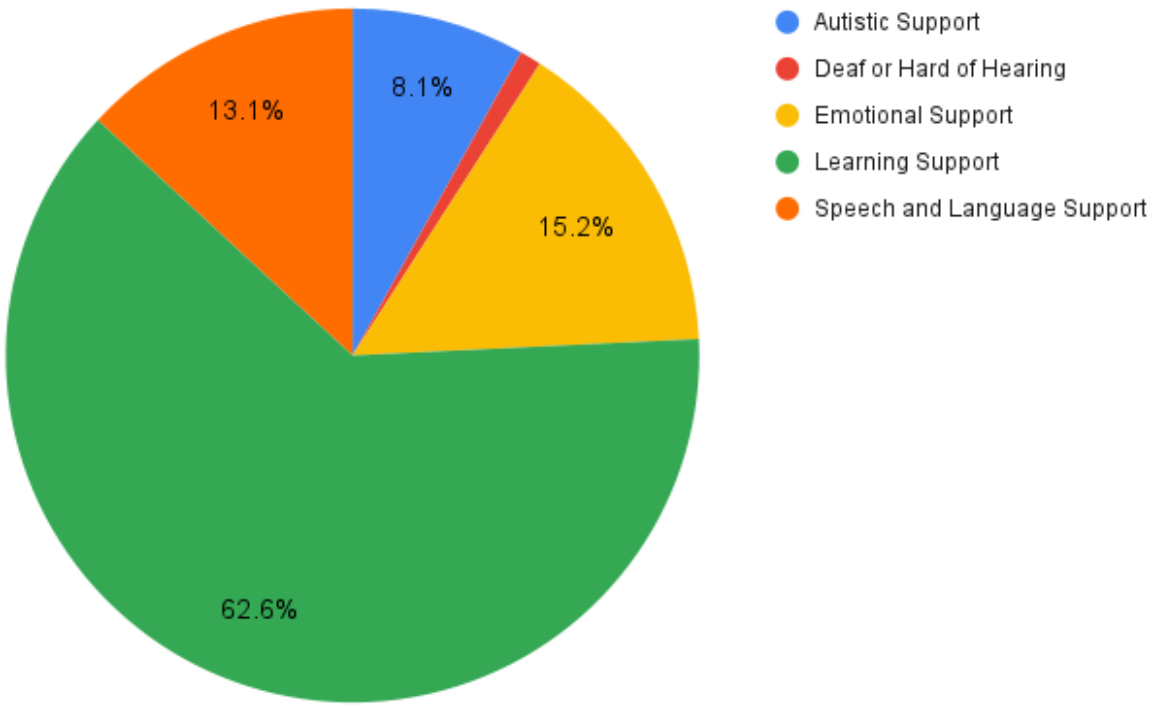
Percentage Breakdown of Disability Categories



Students with disabilities receive special education services based on their need with some students receiving more than one type of support. The following is a percentage breakdown of special education supports received by transition aged students within the district including primary, second, third, and fourth supports: autistic support (8.1%), deaf or hearing impaired support (1.0%), emotional support (15.2%), learning support (62.6%), and speech or language support (13.1%) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Percentage Breakdown of Special Education Supports



The business included in the study sent letters to the local school districts offering to create partnerships for students to develop work skills and gain experience in a community

setting. The business is subdivided into departments including maintenance, food service, reception, housekeeping, marketing, and medical care.

Site Permission. The site for this research included one school district in a rural county in Pennsylvania. A letter (see Appendix B) was sent to the superintendent of the district requesting permission to distribute a survey link to educators via email within the high school. The district evaluated the permission in accordance with board policy and granted permission. An additional site permission letter (see Appendix C) was sent to the executive director of the business seeking to create opportunities for students. Both site permission letters gave an overview of the study, potential participants, explanation of confidentiality procedures, and request for a written permission letter to be returned to the researcher.

Participants

The participants of this study included employers and educators within one rural county in Pennsylvania. Both groups were recruited through email requests with a link to access a Google Form survey.

Inclusion Criteria. The employer participants were individuals that serve in a supervisory role including but not limited to department managers, shift supervisors, and team leaders. The employer participants are also current employees of a business interested in partnering with schools to provide work-based learning opportunities for students.

Educator participants are currently employed or subcontracted by the Heritage School District and provide instruction to students within the district's high school building. Educator participants include general and special education teachers, professional staff including guidance counselors, nurses, behavioral and mental health experts, and administrative personnel that typically work with high school age students with and without disabilities.

Recruitment Procedures. Employer participants were invited to participate through an email (see Appendix D) sent to the executive director of the company with request to forward to personnel in supervisory roles. The email included a description of the study, benefits, and potential risks involved with participation, and a link to a Google Form survey, and a flier with a scannable QR code to access the survey directly that can be printed at the convenience of the business.

Educators' perspectives were also solicited through an email survey. The description of the study, benefits and risks associated with participation, and a link to the survey was included in an email to the teaching staff of the Heritage Area High School (see Appendix E).

Sample sizes of eight to ten per participant group were anticipated. The business employs numerous supervisors in health services, food service, housekeeping and laundry, maintenance, marketing, administrative, and others. The teaching staff of the school district includes 50 potential educator participants.

Human Subjects Protections. All participants were provided with details of the study including risks and benefits of participation, methods for record keeping, confidentiality measures, and contact information if they have further questions. Educator and employer participants were informed that by completing the survey they were consenting to participate in the research study. It was explained that participants may withdraw at any time, refuse to answer any question, and there would be no penalty for such actions. Documents containing confidential information will be kept under lock and key. Any identifying characteristics of the participants are not included in data reporting.

Timeline

Site permission request letters were sent to the district and businesses in June 2022. Site permissions were received by the end of August 2022 and University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will be requested in February 2023. IRB approval was received in March 2023, emails were sent inviting employers and educators to complete the online survey. Data collection took place during March 2023.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's role is described from the first person point of view as an element of self-reflexivity as it is appropriate and encouraged in a qualitative study (Tracy, 2013). Since 2017, I held the role of transition coordinator for the participating school district. The transition coordinator position is split between the site district and a neighboring district and follows the teacher contract. As a peer, not a supervisor, to the potential educator participants there is not an imbalance of power between the researcher and educator participants which limits the risk of inadequate data (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

I attended a meeting with the executive director of the business as a follow up to the business's request to create work-based learning opportunities for students. I maintain email communication with the executive director in order to continue to develop the work-based learning opportunities. I have no known additional personal or professional connections to other potential employer participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through an online survey for educator and employer participants. Data collected through the online survey of employers and educators was entered into MAXQDA to determine recurring themes among the two participant groups and within each group. Importance

ratings were averaged for each participant group and cross compared for discrepancies or similarities. Descriptive statements were coded for similarities within and across participant groups. A side-by-side comparison of the qualitative and quantitative data was used to identify commonalities between the qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell).

Instrument

The Google Form survey included fourteen skills categorized as task-related social behaviors. Eleven of the skills, including, carrying out immediate instructions, offering to help coworkers, providing information, and asking supervisor for assistance (see Table 2 for a full list) were initially identified by Salzberg et al., (1986) as important task-related social behaviors. Agran et al., (2016) adapted the instrument used by Salzberg et al., (1986) with language changes and the inclusion of additional task-related social skills including, interacting well with customers/clients, having friends around during on-the-job hours, and working as a member of a team, if appropriate. The current survey included further language changes so all behaviors are worded in a positive frame so that Likert scale ratings are consistent among questions. Meaning, a rating of five indicated that performing behavior is essential for employment success rather than a rating of five indicating that not performing the behavior is essential for employment success. See Table 2 for a comparison of the language usage and changes between the previous and current studies.

Table 2

Task-Related Social Behaviors Identified in Previous Literature

Task-related social behaviors included in the study by Salzberg et al. (1986)	Task-related social behaviors[a] included in the study by Agran et al. (2016)	Task-related social behaviors[b] included in this study
Carrying out immediate instructions	Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention	Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention

Offering to help coworkers	Offering to help coworkers	Offering to help coworkers
Providing information	Providing job related information to other employees	Providing job related information to other employees
Asking supervisor for assistance	Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed	Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed
Getting information before job	Finding necessary information prior to performing the job	Finding necessary information prior to performing the job
Referring inquiries to qualified personnel	Referring persons to someone qualified to handle the task	Referring customers/clients to someone qualified to handle the task
Carrying out delayed instructions	Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed	Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed
Clarifying instructions	Seeking clarification for unclear instructions	Seeking clarification for unclear instructions
Talking - not working	Talking to coworkers instead of working	Working on a task instead of talking to coworkers
Response to criticism	Responding appropriately to critical feedback	Responding appropriately to critical feedback
Using weak or phony excuses	Using weak excuses when late or absent from work	Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work
	Interacts well with customers/clients	Interacting well with customers/clients
	Works as a member of a team, if appropriate	Working as a member of a team, if appropriate
	Having friends around during on the job hours	Not having friends around during on the job hours

Note. Adapted from *Behaviors that contribute to entry-level employment: A profile of five jobs* by C. L. Salzberg, M. Agran, and B. Lignugaris/Kraft,1986, Applied Research in Mental Retardation. Copyright 1986 by Pergamon Journals Ltd. and *Employment social skills: What skills are really valued?* by M. Agran, C. Hughes, C. A. Thoma, and L. A. Scott, 2016, Career

Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals. Copyright 2014 by Hammill Institute on Disabilities.

[a] Behaviors were changed from original study to include additional skills and/or language changes to reflect employment changes over time. [b] Behaviors include language changes for consistency in ratings and verb tense.

Employer participants that completed the survey of Salzberg et al. (1986) rated each behavior on a 0 to 5 scale of importance for job success and frequency of occurrence. The Agran et al. (2016) educator participants also rated the behaviors on a 0 to 5 scale for perceived importance for employment success and frequency of instruction. In the first section of the current survey instrument, employer and educator participants rated each of the fourteen behaviors on a 0 to 5 scale, had the opportunity to justify their ratings for each behavior, and describe the behavior from their perspective (see Appendix F).

Demographic data was also collected for employers (see Appendix G) and educators (see Appendix H). Demographic information for employers (*n*=3) includes job titles (executive director, *n*=1 secretary, *n*=1), years employed in the position (1-2 years *n*=1; 3-5 years *n*=2) , number of employees the participant oversees (1-4 employees *n*=1; 5-10 employees *n*=1; 11 or more *n*=1), and qualifications of subordinate employees (high school diploma or GED *n*=3; specific industry credentials *n*=1). Educators (*n*=13) provided demographic information including specific role, number of students served in a typical year, years of service in education, and typical age range of students (see Table 3).

Table 3
Educator Demographic Information

Characteristic	*n*	%
Years employed as educator		
6-10 years	1	7.7
11-20 years	7	53.8
21 or more years	5	38.5
Role in education		
General education teacher	5	41.7
Special education teacher	3	25
Administrator	3	25
Other (including nurse, school counselor etc.)	1	8.3
Number of students in a typical school year		
Less than 50	6	46.2
51-100	2	15.4
101 or more	5	38.5
Age range of majority of student		
14-15 years and younger	7	58.3
16-17 years	8	66.7
18 years and older	4	33.3
Total participants	13	

Presentation of Results

Results are presented in narrative form within chapter 4 of this dissertation. Descriptions of task-related social behaviors, importance ratings, and comparisons between participant groups are included. Data is organized by participant groups and recurring themes between groups. Direct quotations of participant perspectives are included to provide detailed descriptions and *in vivo* language, or language using "terms, sentences, or phrasing directly from the field or from participants" (p. 129), is used, when possible, to reduce researcher interpretation of participant meanings (Tracy, 2013). The results of the study will also be shared with the faculty of the high school building where the study takes place.

Limitations

This study was limited to one county in Pennsylvania with one participating school district from which educator participants were recruited. The number of potential participants was a limitation however purposeful selection of participants is typical of a qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The number of participants was a limitation since the employer group made up 18.8% of the total number of participants and educators made up the remaining 81.2%.

The provided list of specific task-related social behaviors may be a limitation in that employers may have a different set of skills that are viewed as more important. Additionally, this study focused solely on the skills identified as important, task-related social behaviors by Salzberg et al. (1986) and Agran et al. (2016). A future study may focus on a different set of skills previously identified as important or necessary. Alternatively, in a future study employers and educators could first identify important skills then provide a description of the context for instruction.

The survey instrument is another potential limitation. Typically, qualitative data is collected directly through the researcher during a qualitative interview rather than sending an instrument to individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). This study was completed three years after the start of a global pandemic during which personal meetings were limited and many companies faced staffing issues. The survey instrument was utilized in the interest of respect of time for potential participants. Additionally, survey fatigue may be a limitation. Participants provided longer descriptions for the behaviors listed towards the beginning of the survey than the end in addition, participants were more likely to skip questions towards the end of the survey.

Finally, a mixed methods study may include two separate participant groups, a larger one from which quantitative data is obtained and a smaller one for qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell). This study gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from each individual participant. Given the small sample size the quantitative data may not be generalizable as a larger sample would.

Summary

Descriptions of task-related social behaviors necessary for employment are essential to prepare students with disabilities for future workplaces. A comparison of educator and employer perspectives in one rural area will clarify definitions of behaviors and perceived importance for access to entry-level employment in that community. The data obtained through this mixed methods study will provide the necessary information and highlight any misalignment in the understanding among the two groups.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter details the quantitative and qualitative results of the mixed methods study described in the previous chapter. To begin, there is a direct comparison of the educators and employers rankings of importance of the 14 task-related social behaviors indicated in previous research as important for employment success (Agran et al., 2016; Salzburg et al., 1986). The comparison is followed by reasons of importance for each of the behaviors and descriptions1` separated by the two participant groups. Finally, the results will address research question 1.) How are employability skills that are task related and social described by employers and educators? and research question 2.) Which task-related social behaviors are viewed as most important by employers and educators as necessary for employment success in entry-level job positions? Research question 3.) How do the views of importance and the descriptions of employability skills differ between employers and educators? will be further discussed in chapter 5 of this document.

Quantitative Data Results

The 14 task-related social behaviors were ranked for importance. At the start of the survey, each participant was asked to select the three most important and three least important behaviors. Participants were also given the opportunity to rate each behavior on a likert scale from 0-5 with 0 meaning *not important for employment success* and 5 meaning *essential for employment success*.

The selections of top three most and least important behaviors were scored and ordered from most important (1) and least important (14) for both educators and employers. This ranking system was determined by assigning a score to each behavior based on the number of

participants who selected a particular behavior as one of the most or least important. One point (+1) was added to each behaviors' total score, each time it was selected within the question requesting participants to select the most important behaviors. One point (-1) was subtracted for each selection the behavior received in the question asking for the least important behaviors. The points for each behavior were totaled to determine the final score.

The final scores for each behavior were then ordered from greatest to least (see Table 4). For example, eight educators selected the behavior *seeking clarification for unclear instruction*s, as one of the most important behaviors and one educator selected it as one of the least important, giving it a total score of seven. Since seven was the highest of educator scores, *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* was ranked as number one, the most important behavior from the educators' perspective. Alternatively, *providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work* and *not having friends around during on-the-job hours* were both scored as negative seven. Seven educators selected each behavior as one of the least important behaviors and zero educators selected either behavior as one of the three most important behaviors. Since these two behaviors received the same score of negative seven (-7), the average from the individual ratings questions was used to break the tie and determine the rank order for the educators ranking of these behaviors.

A Wilcoxon rank sum test revealed that employers' views of importance were not significantly different from educators' views of importance for all task-related social behaviors except not having friends around during on-the-job hours, $z = 2.29$, 95% CI [± 1.96] (see Table 4).

Table 4

Rank Order of Behaviors, Average of Importance Ratings and Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test Results

Behavior	Educators		Employers		R	*z*
	Rank	Average	Rank	Average		
Seeking clarification for unclear instructions	1	4.62	2	4.67	25.5	.00
Working as a team, if appropriate	2	4.77	3	5.00	30.0	.61
Interacting well with customers / clients	3	4.46	1	5.00	34.5	1.21
Responding appropriately to critical feedback	4	4.23	5	4.67	31.0	.74
Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention	5	4.54	6[b]	4.33	25.0	−.07
Finding necessary information prior to performing the job	6	3.54	8[b]	4.00	29.5	.54
Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed	7[a]	3.77	6[b]	4.33	31.0	.74
Referring customers / clients to someone qualified to handle the task	8[a]	3.31	8[b]	4.00	30.5	.67
Working on a task instead of talking to coworkers	9[a]	3.31	13	3.00	29.5	.54
Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed	10[a]	2.92	10	4.67	39.5	1.88
Providing job related information to other employees	11	2.92	11	4.33	34.5	1.14
Offering to help coworkers	12[b]	3.15	4	4.33	35.5	1.35
Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work	12[b]	3.15	12	4.00	29.5	.54
Not having friends around during on-the-job hours	14	2.69	14	4.67	42.5	**2.29**

Note. Rank order: 1 = most important, 14 = least important. For the Wilcoxon rank sum test, R = sum of the ranks of employers; *z* = test statistic, significant results are in bold at 95% level of confidence. [a]A tie in rank order was determined by average of individual importance ratings. [b]Tie break in rank order could not be determined.

Discrepancies in Quantitative Data

Employers' importance rankings demonstrate misalignment with the average ratings of importance for each individual behavior. For example, *not having friends around during on-the-job hours* received a 4.67 average importance rating by employers which contrasts with the importance ranking of least important of the 14 task-related social behaviors. This discrepancy could be due to the small number of employer participants.

Qualitative Data Results

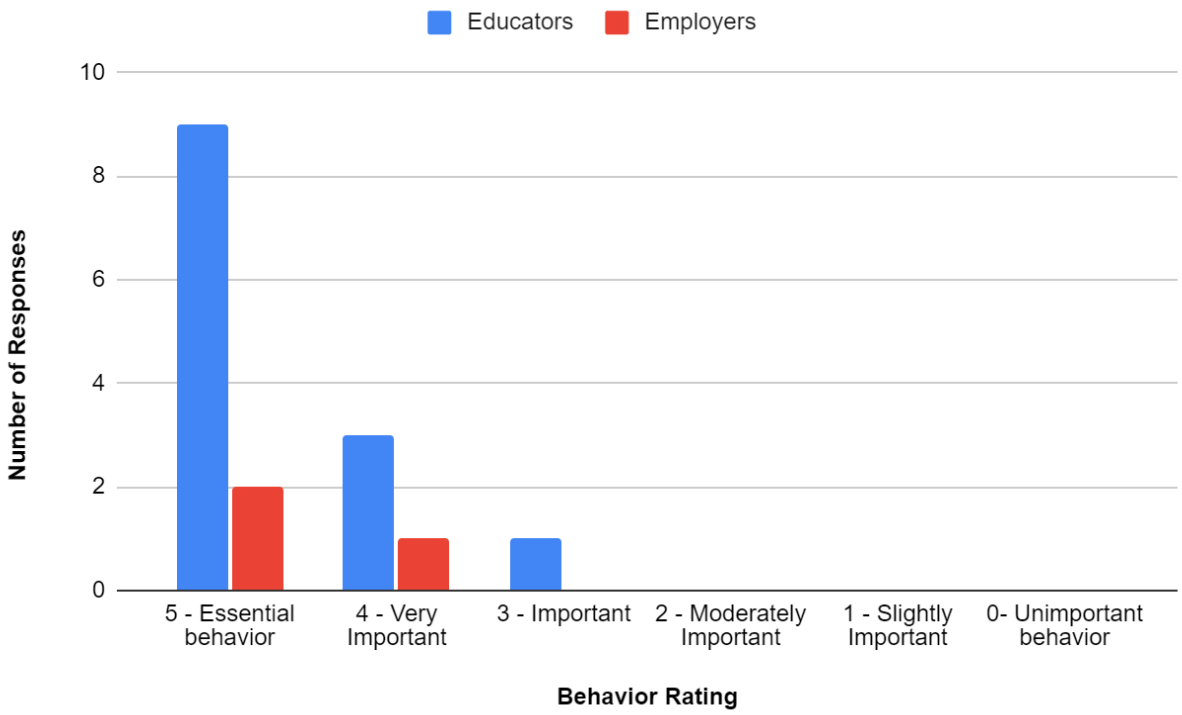
Results are presented for each behavior in order of importance ranking as determined by educator participants. Each behavior includes descriptive statistics including average importance ratings and overall rank of importance according to employers and educators followed by reasons for importance and descriptions of the behavior separated by employer and educator participant groups. Differences and similarities between employer and educator descriptions of behaviors are also included in this section.

Seeking Clarification for Unclear Instructions

Employers ranked *seeking clarification for unclear instruction*s as the second most important behavior with an average importance rating of 4.67. Educators ranked *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* as the most important task-related social behavior essential for employment success with an average importance rating of 4.62. All participants rated this behavior as important, very important, or essential for employment success with the majority of participants (n=11) rating this behavior as essential for success (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Ratings of Importance for Seeking Clarification for Unclear Instructions



Reasons for Importance. Reasons *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* is ranked as one of the most important task-related social behaviors center around the idea of effective business operations. If employees fail to completely understand a task, the misunderstanding can lead to a "waste of time and effort" and cause "unwanted results", according to several educator participants. Seeking clarification ensures that a task is completed correctly according to the business standards. Additionally, when tasks are completed per business requirements, a consistent product or service is provided.

Employer Description. Employers described *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* as asking a supervisor or team lead for clearer directions. Additionally, employee 2

made note that "without proper information, appropriate completion of job tasks may not be possible." Seeking clarification for unclear instructions also saves time for all parties.

Educator Description. Predominant themes in the educator descriptions of the behavior of *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* were effectiveness and efficiency. By seeking clarity, an employee may be more effective in the job in addition to completing tasks with efficiency and potentially saving time for the business. Failure to seek clarity could lead to "unwanted results," "having to go back to fix problems," and "completing [a task] incorrectly."

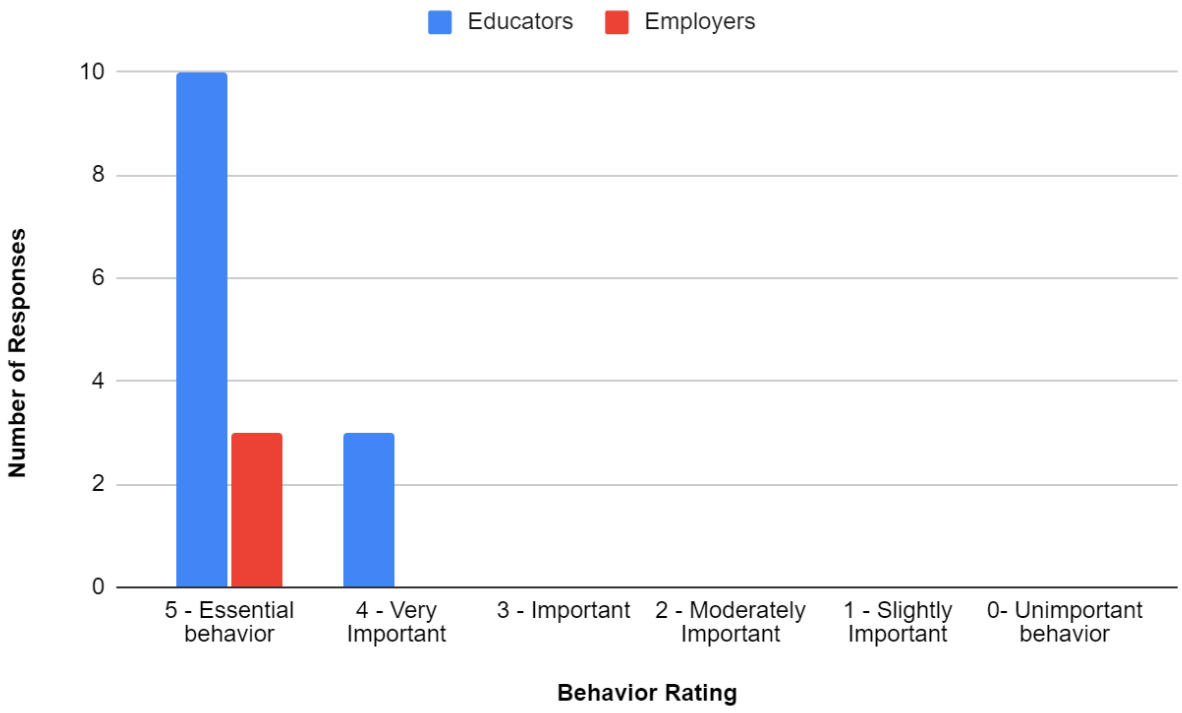
Seeking clarification for unclear instructions can include numerous actions. Approaching a person, asking questions, listening, repeating information, asking for different wording, and asking to see examples. One respondent, educator 10, an administrator, indicated the leader or supervisor's role in seeking clarification is to ensure the employee understands by "checking their understanding by asking questions and verifying they understand versus relying on them to ask me what they need more instruction on."

Working as a Team, if Appropriate

Employers ranked *working as a team* as third most important behavior even though it received an average importance rating of 5.00. Educators ranked *working as a team* as the second most important behavior for employment success with a 4.77 average importance rating. All participants rated *working as a team* as very important or essential for employment success (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Ratings of Importance for Working as a Team, if Appropriate



Reasons for Importance. Similar to *seeking clarification for unclear instructions*, *working as a team* enables businesses to operate efficiently. When each member of a team completes his or her tasks, the entire business is effective. *Working as a team* also allows businesses to capitalize on individual employee strengths which makes the business as a whole more effective. If an employee struggles to cooperate and work as a part of a team when teamwork is required for the job, the employee may not be successful in the work setting. When teamwork is necessary for the job, the ability to work as a team is also an essential behavior for employees to maintain their employment.

Employer Description. Employer 3 indicated the importance of teamwork in a business with less than 40 employees, by noting "[all staff members] must work as a team and do things that are not under our job description."

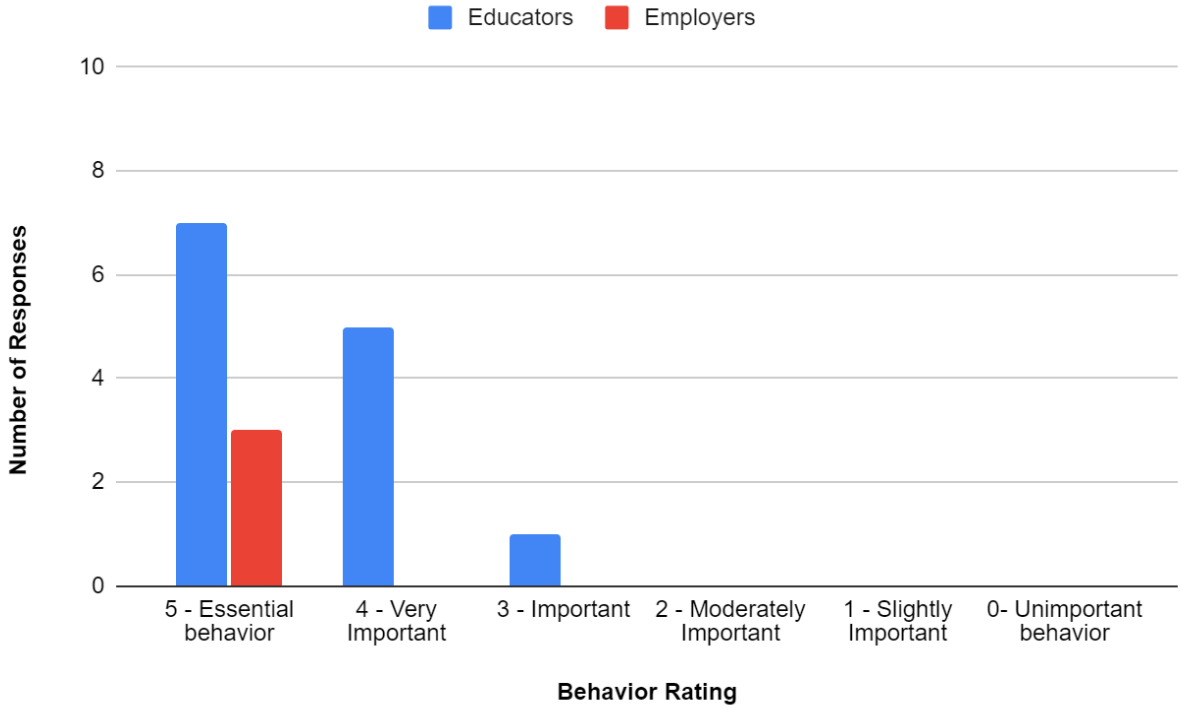
Educator Description. When working as a team is part of an employee's role, it is important to get along with others well enough to complete the task or project. It may mean putting aside personal differences to complete tasks. *Working as a team* is not as important in some industries where each individual employee completes tasks without others' assistance. Educators 2 and 3 indicated reasons *working as a team* is good for businesses since teams can be "the most effective and efficient mode of completing tasks" when "everyone knows their role and expectations." Educator 8 stated," [teams can] use individual strengths to cover weakness[es] and get the most out of the group of employees."

Interacting Well With Customers/Clients

Employers ranked *interacting well with customers or clients* as the most important behavior with an average rating of 5.00, indicating that all employers in the survey rated *interacting well with customers* as essential for employment success. Educators ranked *interacting well with customers* as third most important with 4.46 average importance rating. All participants rated *interacting with customers or clients* as important, very important, or essential for employment success (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Ratings of Importance for Interacting Well With Customers/Clients



Reasons for Importance. All employer participants rated this behavior as essential for employment success, citing customer satisfaction as the reason. Positive interactions with customers is important to build a returning customer base. If a business is directly dependent on customers, the business will be evaluated by the customers based on their interactions with employees. As educator 8 noted, "customers and clients expect to be treated very well all the time" indicating that *interacting well with customers* is a behavior that can be occurring constantly throughout a work day. If an employee is not able to interact well with customers and clients, they will not maintain successful employment.

Employer Description. When asked about *interacting well with customers and clients*, only one employer participant elected to respond. Employer 3 stated, "We work with people, and

if you do not take the time to interact and be social with our clients, we have defeated the purpose of our job."

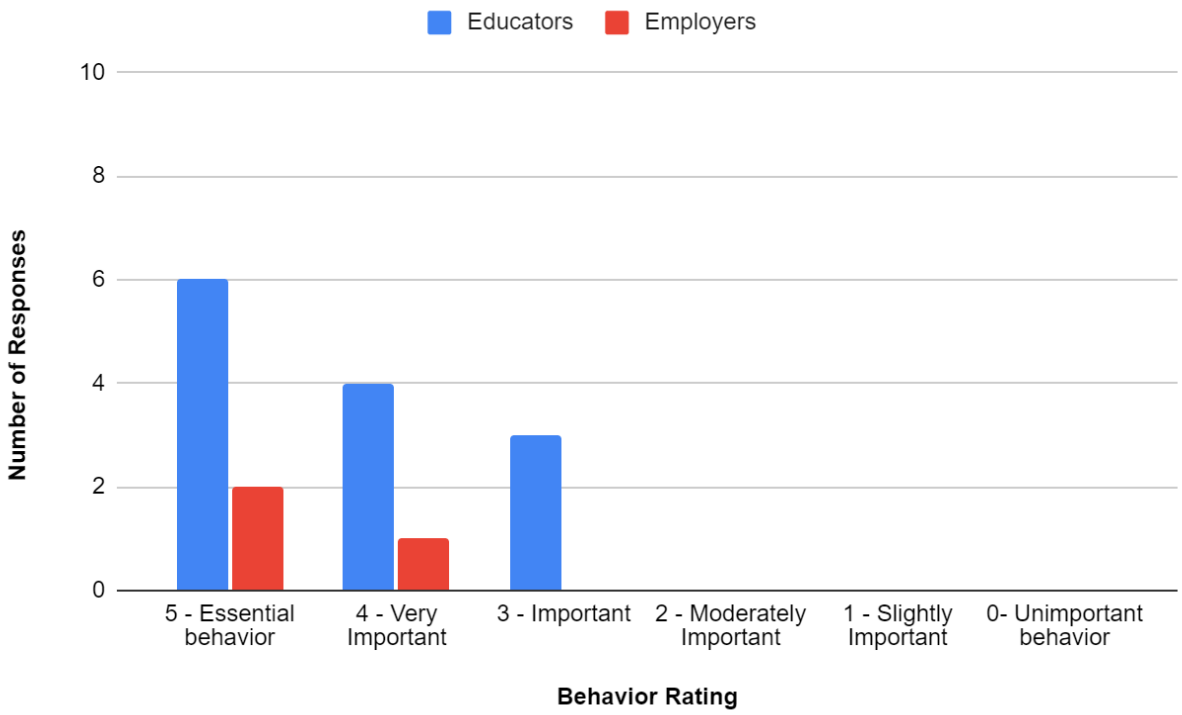
Educator Description. *Interacting well with customers or clients* is good for business. Several educators noted this skill is important when a business is "dependent on clients" or "interacts with the public on a regular basis." Interactions need to be positive for the client or customer so they return and the business can remain open and grow. Customers must be treated "very well, all the time." Employees should have "tidy appearance, correct information, eye contact, smiles when appropriate, [and] professional language." The employees represent the business and remain professional through customer interactions "even if the customer isn't."

Responding Appropriately to Critical Feedback

Employers ranked *responding appropriately to critical feedback* as fifth most important with 4.67 average importance rating. Educators ranked *responding appropriately to critical feedback* as the fourth most important task-related social behavior with a 4.23 average rating of importance. Participant ratings of *responding appropriately to critical feedback* are more dispersed among the highest ratings than the previously mentioned behaviors (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Ratings of Importance for Responding Appropriately to Critical Feedback



Reasons for Importance. Behaviors considered more important than *responding appropriately to critical feedback* are for the betterment of the business establishment. This behavior is important for the growth of the individual employee. According to educators, when "one can better understand how to perform their job" they "maximize their potential." Personal and professional growth is the foundational reason for the importance of this behavior. When employees are willing to learn and improve, business is productive and projects are able to progress.

Employer Description. Employers described the importance of *responding appropriately to critical feedback* because it promotes "morale and the harmonious atmosphere."

Staff should respond appropriately without being defensive, making excuses, or rudeness because "growing through feedback ensures employee growth."

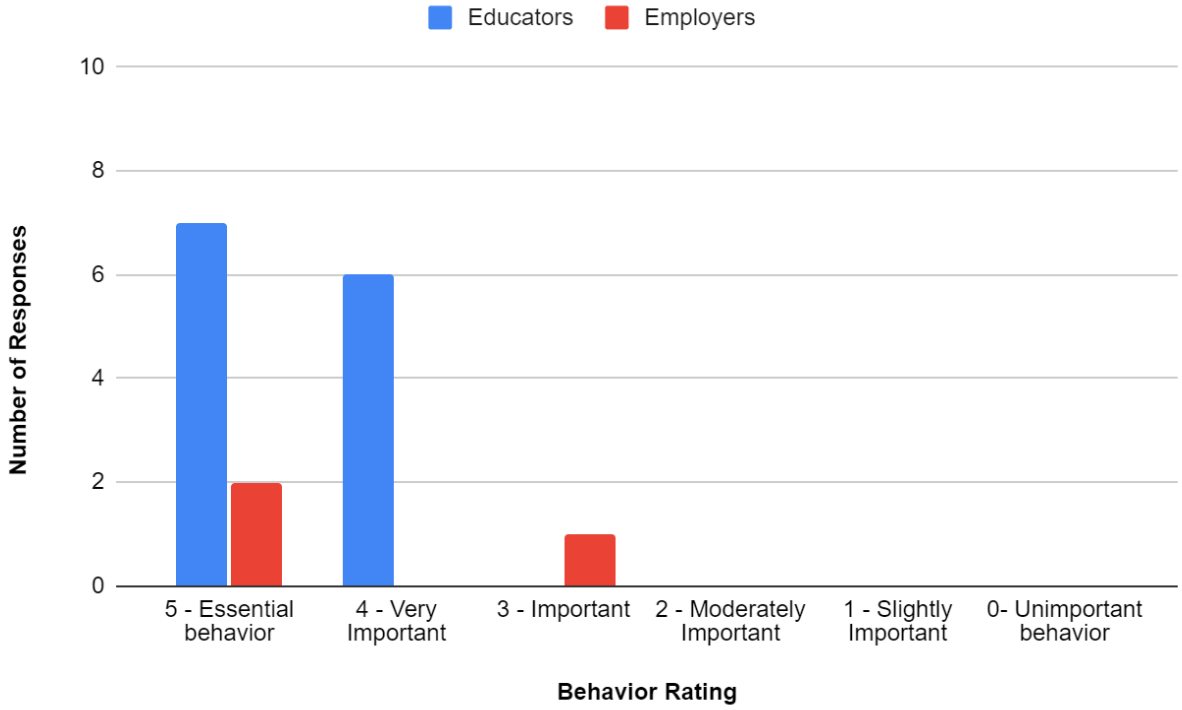
Educator Description. The educators' description of *responding appropriately to critical feedback* centered around the theme of growth. The reason responding appropriately to critical feedback is important is for the growth and improvement of the individual employee. Feedback is given to make the employee more productive, help the employee learn from mistakes and get better over time. Educator 12 noted, "Constructive criticism is important for employee growth and to help the employee maximize their potential." When an employee responds appropriately to critical feedback, they will listen and understand what is being said with expectation to learn from the feedback. Accepting feedback should not include the following responses, retaliation, talking poorly about the company, profane language, disrespect, or anger.

Carrying out Instructions Needing Immediate Attention

Employers ranked *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention* as sixth most important with 4.33 average importance rating which was a tie with *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed*. Educators ranked this behavior as fifth most important with a 4.54 average importance rating. As with all previous behaviors discussed, *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention* was rated as important, very important, or essential for employment success (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Ratings of Importance for Carrying out Instructions Needing Immediate Attention



Reasons for Importance. This behavior may be more important than others because of the word immediate. When a directive is given and needs immediate attention, completion of that directive or instruction is essential for business operations. Additionally, instructions requiring immediate attention may involve an element of safety, loss, or other emergency which creates a higher level of importance than other behaviors.

Employer Description. Prioritization was the key theme in employer descriptions of *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention*. If a task is directed for immediate completion, reprioritizing a list of tasks may be necessary "so the most important thing can be completed".

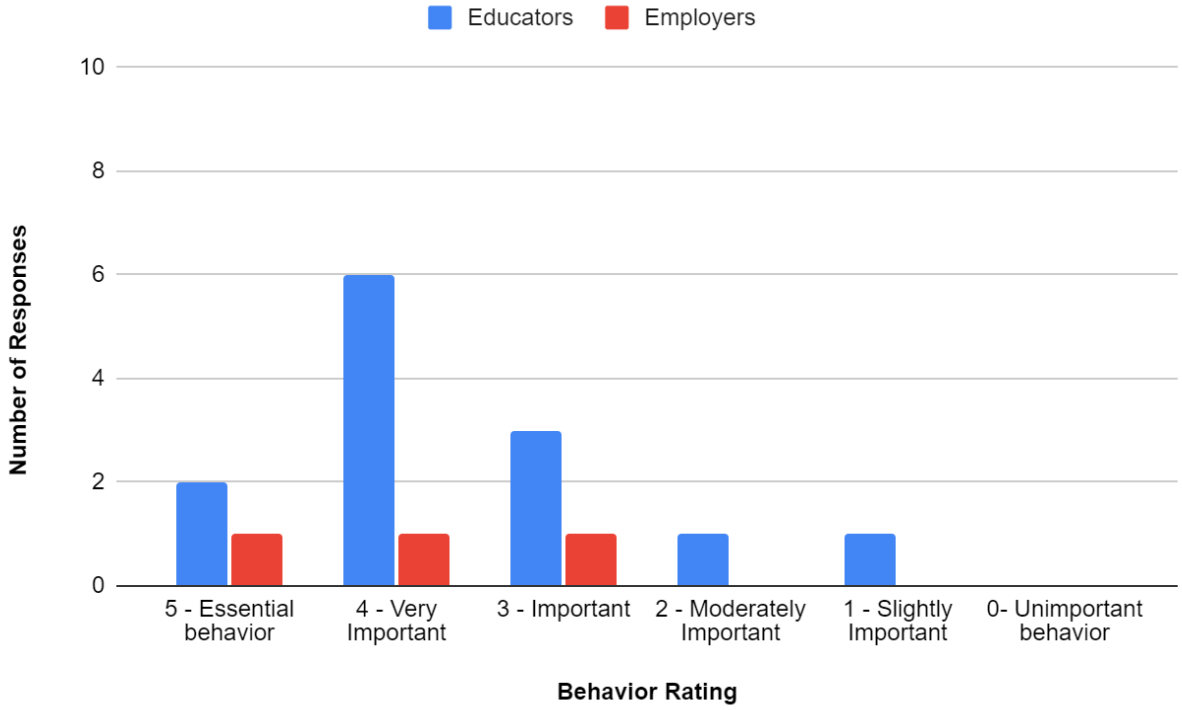
Educator Description. Many phrases can be used to describe *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention*. Educator descriptions of this behavior included "right away," "time sensitive," "with some urgency," "right now," and "ASAP." Reasons that *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention* is an important behavior for employees include providing customer service for a "customer that is there in the moment," tasks that could "involve an element of safety or loss," and emergency situations. The ability to prioritize regular tasks from highest to lowest as well as set aside regular tasks to complete an item that is out of the ordinary are key factors in this behavior.

Finding Necessary Information Prior to Performing the Job

Employers ranked *finding necessary information prior to performing the job* as eighth most important, which was a tie with *referring customers or clients to someone qualified to handle the task*. The tie was not broken due to both behaviors receiving 4.00 average importance ratings. Educators ranked *finding necessary information prior to performing the job* as sixth most important with 3.54 as the average importance rating. *Finding necessary information prior to performing a job* is a behavior that participants' ratings varied across most categories with the majority (n=7) of participants rating this behavior as very important (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Ratings of Importance for Finding Necessary Information Prior to Performing the Job



Reasons for Importance. *Finding information prior to performing a job* is a behavior that can "reduce error and chances of having to redo" tasks in the workplace, according to one educator. This behavior is important for the success of the business and the individual employee's growth. If an employee does not have all the information prior to performing a task, they could "get hurt or create a financial liability". Employers appreciate employees that are self-starters and seek answers before asking questions. When an employee is appreciated for the behaviors they display, they are more likely to be successful in their job.

Employer Description. A recurring theme among the all employers surveyed regarding finding necessary information prior to performing the job was efficiency. *Finding necessary information prior to performing the job* "takes time to gather all information first" and "saves

time" in the end. In addition to time saving, this behavior leads to completed tasks "without compromising the quality of output from ignorance" and "improves the possibility of things getting done the right way first."

Educator Description. Educators described *finding necessary information prior to performing the job* from two different perspectives. One group of educators described *finding necessary information prior to performing the job* from the individual task perspective. Educator 8 and educator 11 described this behavior through the lens of training or certification necessary prior to obtaining the job. From either perspective, this behavior requires asking questions of a supervisor, coworker, or expert on the task. Educators also mentioned the need to perform research to obtain the necessary information to complete a job.

Other themes drawn from educator responses included initiative and growth. Getting information to perform regular duties may not often be needed however, when something is out of the ordinary it takes initiative to ask more questions. Finding information demonstrates knowledge and shows growth.

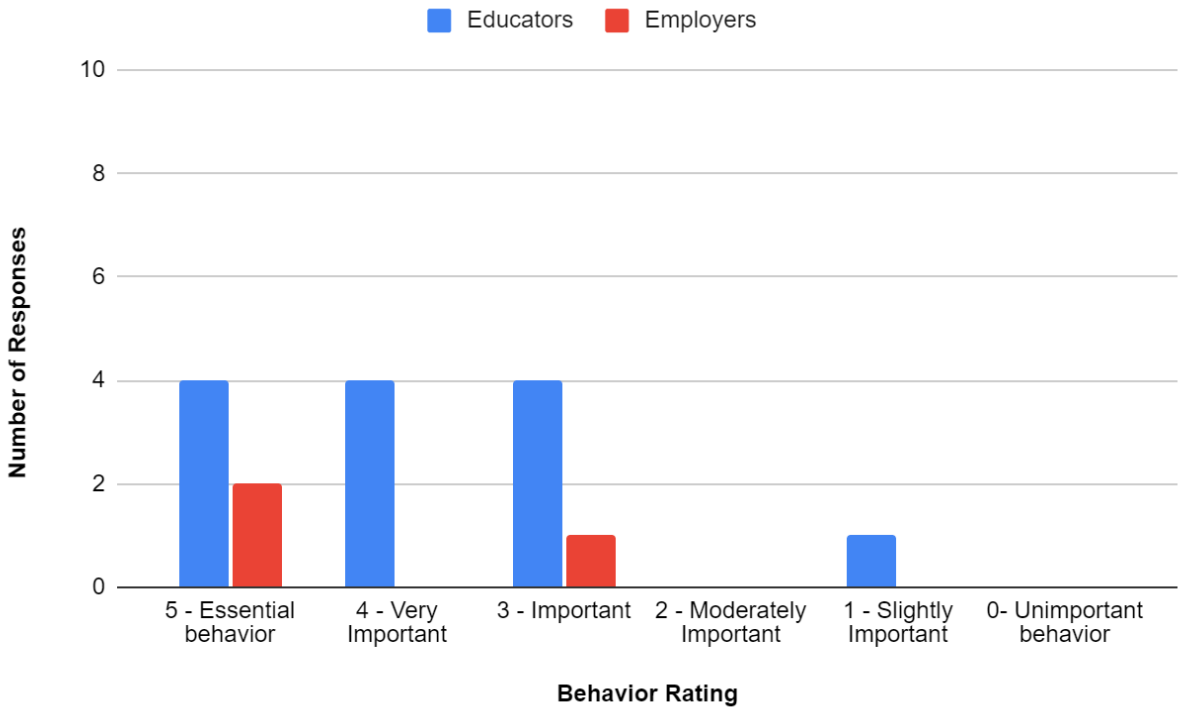
Notifying Supervisor When Assistance is Needed

Notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed was ranked as the sixth most important task-related social behavior by employers which was tied with *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention*; both behaviors also received average 4.33 importance ratings by employers. Educators ranked *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* as seventh most important, which was tied with *referring customers or clients to someone qualified to handle the task*. The tie in ranks was broken by the average importance rating of 3.77 for notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed. *Notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* is a behavior that received

varied ratings of importance among educators and employers. There was no one importance rating that a majority of participants selected for this behavior (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Ratings of Importance for Notifying Supervisor When Assistance is Needed



Reasons for Importance. This behavior was ranked as less important by many educator participants because they suggested that assistance may be sought from a colleague or peer before seeking assistance from a supervisor. Alternatively, employers noted this behavior as essential since providing assistance is within the role of the supervisor. Willingness to ask a supervisor also demonstrates humility and willingness to learn. Employees that are eager to learn are valued within a business. Demonstrating a willingness or desire to learn and improve with task completion could increase likelihood of employment success.

Employer Description. A recurring theme for *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* among employers surveyed was help. Supervisors are in their role to assist their employees learn the duties of the job. Admiting you don't know everything or "swallowing your pride to ask for assistance" "opens the door of communication and trust." Asking for assistance is important "even if it means you may look incompetent." In addition to helping tasks get completed, the supervisor's response may increase "the staff member's feelings of value and growth."

Educator Description. *Notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* requires an understanding of the "fine line [between] figuring things out on your own and notifying a supervisor." Not all challenging situations require a supervisory level of support, colleagues and coworkers may be able to provide necessary answers or assistance before contacting a supervisor. Educator 9, an administrator, would rather an employee ask a "million questions than none at all" additionally suggesting that "people feel that asking questions or asking for assistance implies they are not competent in their jobs." Other educators indicated that asking too many questions of a supervisor "is not looked good upon" and could indicate a mismatch with a job.

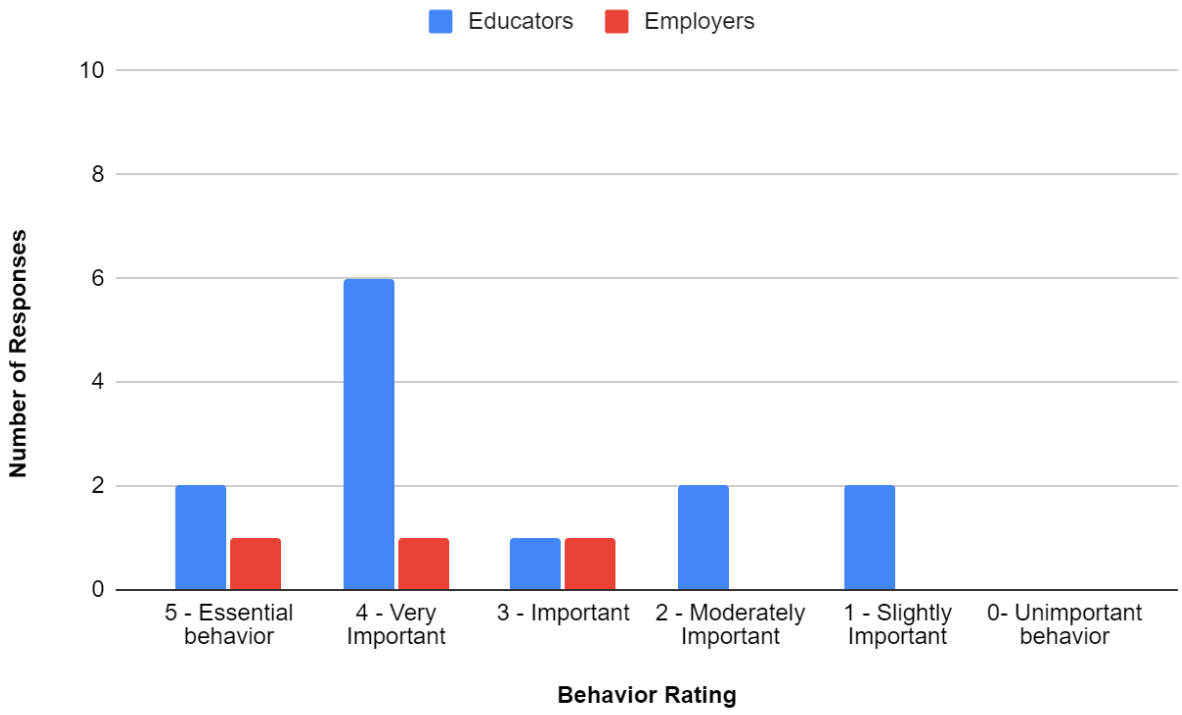
Referring Customers/Clients to Someone Qualified to Handle the Task

Employers ranked *referring customers or clients to someone qualified to handle the task* as eighth most important with a 4.00 average importance rating, which was a tie with *finding necessary information prior to performing the job*. Educators ranked *referring customers or clients to someone qualified to handle the task* as seventh most important, which was a tie with *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed*. The educators' tie for seventh most important behavior was broken by using average ratings of importance with *referring customers or clients*

to someone qualified to handle the task receiving an average importance rating of 3.31. The ratings of this behavior varied among participants with educators rating *referring customers or clients to someone qualified to handle the task* from essential for employment success to slightly important. No two employers rated this behavior the same (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Ratings of Importance for Referring Customers to Someone Qualified to Handle the Task



Reasons for Importance. This behavior's importance is related to providing quality customer service. Referring a customer to a person that is more qualified than the initial employee the customer approached will raise the level of customer service and increase the likelihood of repeat business. Satisfied customers are essential to a business. This behavior's varied importance ratings stem from the indirect connection to customer service. Understanding one's own abilities, limitations, and job requirements are important for employment success.

Employer Description. Employers want their business to seem "well-run with educated staff." Customers are a key component of many businesses and businesses "want customers to feel important, valued," receive "better service" and have employees that "better assist with [customer] needs."

Educator Description. *Referring customers and clients to someone qualified to handle the task* requires a strong self-awareness, understanding of the company, and knowledge about coworkers' skills and knowledge. Knowing personal capabilities and what knowledge is still lacking has value. Employees should provide information to customers and clients only when they are certain the information is accurate. Referring a customer to another employee or supervisor may be viewed as an attempt to avoid work however it is recommended over providing incorrect information. Referring a customer to better qualified personnel will provide better customer service because the customer will receive information or assistance from a potential "expert on the topic" in a timely manner. This may decrease the likelihood that the customer will "get mad and go elsewhere" which means a loss of business.

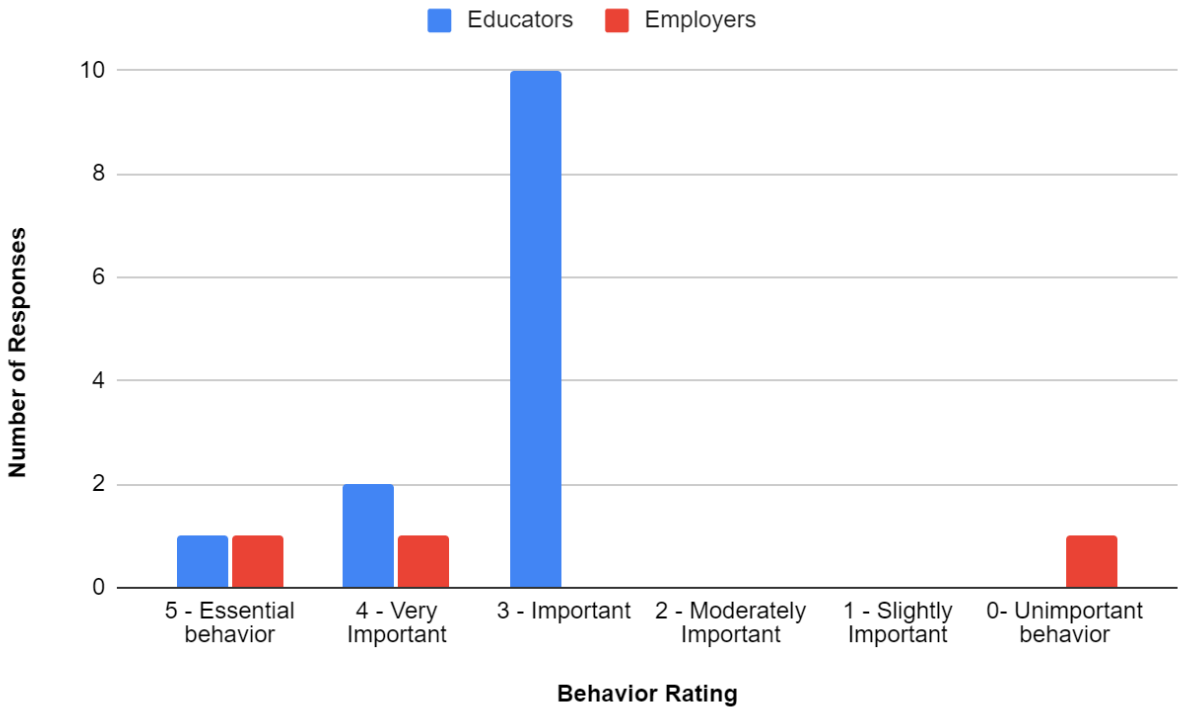
Working on a Task Instead of Talking to Coworkers

Employers ranked *working on a task instead of talking to coworkers* as 13th most important with 3.00 average rating of importance. For educators, *working on a task instead of talking to coworkers* was tied for ninth most important with *carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed*. The tie in rank was broken by average importance ratings with *working on a task instead of talking to coworkers* receiving a 3.31 average rating and *carrying out instructions after time has elapsed* receiving a 2.92 average rating. The majority (n=10) of educators rated this behavior as important and the remaining educators chose very important or

essential as importance ratings. There was no agreement between any two employers with selections of essential, very important, and unimportant (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

Ratings of Importance for Working on a Task Instead of Talking to Coworkers



Reasons for Importance. Many educator participants noted the reason this behavior is only important is the balance that exists between talking while working. Talking to coworkers can create a positive work environment and make time at work seem to pass more quickly as long as the employee can maintain the expected pace of task completion while talking. Employer 2 also indicated this behavior is less important "because people can still carry out tasks while talking."

Employer Description. If people can complete tasks while talking with coworkers, it may "foster a healthy work environment and solidify peer relationships." This behavior has the potential to increase overtime and cost the company unbudgeted money.

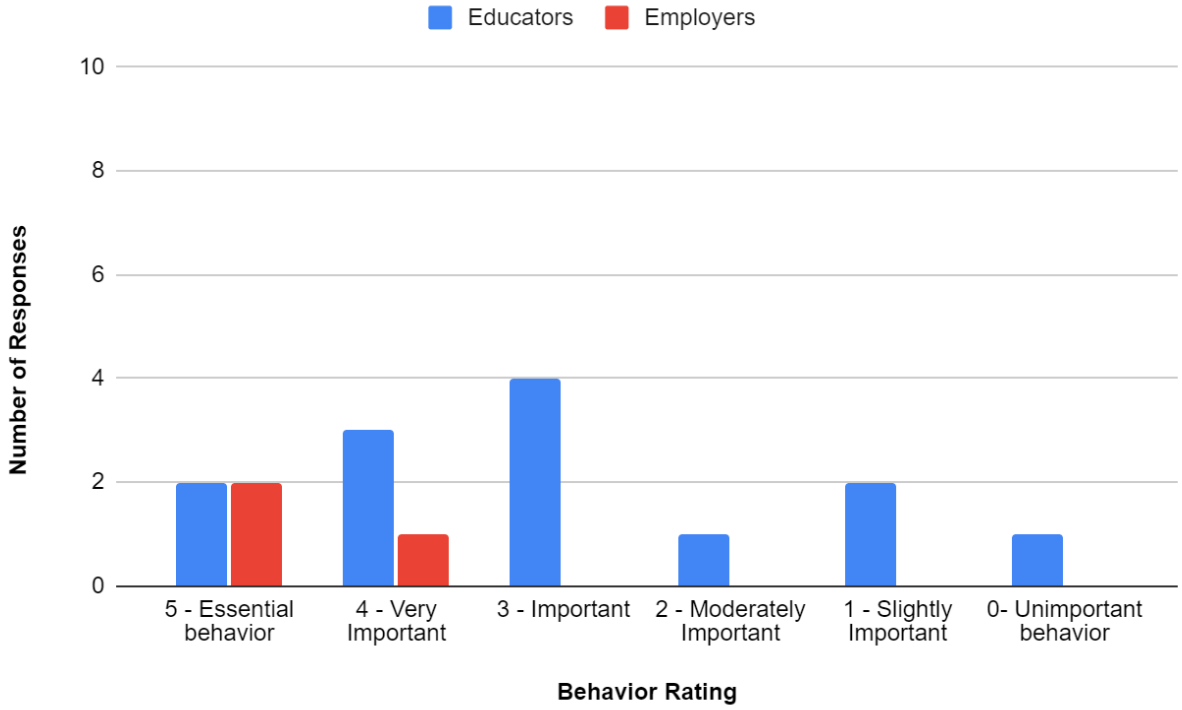
Educator Description. Educators did not rate *working on a task instead of talking to coworkers* as essential for employment success. Working on a task can occur while talking to coworkers which would build relationships and create a positive work environment. Additionally, there are times that working on a task includes the need to talk to coworkers. However, as educator 6 noted, "there is a line between building relationships and completing a task." If quiet focus is required to complete a task, talking to coworkers would detract from task completion, however if productivity does not decrease with conversation, this behavior is not important for workplace success. Task completion should be the primary goal during work time and building relationships secondary. Scheduled breaks and lunch are times when talking to coworkers for social reasons should occur when building relationships is a goal.

Carrying out Instructions Needing Attention After Time has Elapsed

Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed was ranked 10th most important with 4.67 importance rating by employers. This behavior was tied with *working on a task instead of talking to coworkers* for ninth most important by educators' ranking, however the tie was broken by the average rating of 2.92 for importance with *carrying out instruction needing attention after time has elapsed* and 3.31 for working on a task instead of talking to coworkers. Educator ratings of *carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed* varied across all levels of importance from unimportant to essential for employment success. Employers rated this behavior as very important or essential for success (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Ratings of Importance for Carrying out Instructions Needing Attention After Time has Elapsed



Reasons for Importance. Some educators noted this behavior as less important because if the "time is up" or "passed the deadline" for a particular task, the task would no longer need to be completed. However, educators that rated this behavior as more important, cited the ability to remember to complete all assigned tasks, even after the passing of time as a challenge for some individuals. Employers indicated that task completion is critical for employment success regardless of the amount of time that passes from receiving the instruction to the completion of the task.

Employer Description. If an instruction is given, the task completion is vital to the business and should be completed even if time has elapsed.

Educator Description. *Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed* can help a business operate effectively and efficiently. A priority list includes items that need completed sooner than others. Employees need to remember the tasks that have later deadlines and complete the items eventually but before the deadline. Supervisors may not be available to give directions after each task is completed, they may provide a list of tasks to be completed by the end of a day or even a week.

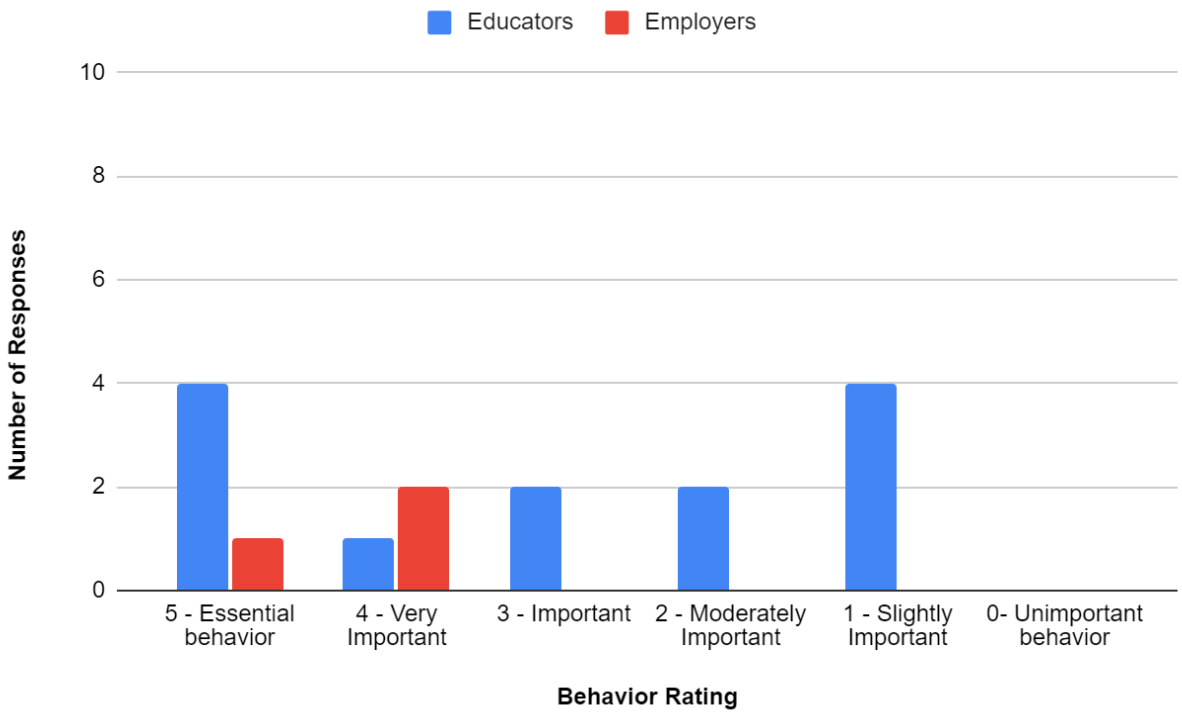
A number of educators noted that some tasks cannot and possibly should not be completed if a deadline has passed. If deadlines are not met, there could be disciplinary action and completion of that particular task is "null and void." If time has elapsed, the employee could find out if the task still needs to be completed and complete it "ASAP."

Providing Job Related Information to Other Employees

This behavior was ranked 11th most important by both educators and employers with average importance ratings of 2.92 and 4.33, respectively. Participants indicated this behavior is not unimportant for employment success however, individual ratings of participants varied from slightly important to essential for employment success (see Figure 15). Additionally, this behavior was rated as essential for employment success by the same number of educators that rated it as only slightly important.

Figure 15

Ratings of Importance for Providing Job Related Information to Other Employees



Reasons for Importance. Educators that selected a lesser important rating for this behavior indicated that *providing necessary job related information to other employees* may not be in the job description for an employee. Providing necessary information was indicated as a supervisor's job and therefore not an important behavior for every employee. Participants that rated this behavior with higher importance indicated that communication with fellow employees builds better relationships in the workplace and adds to the efficiency of the business.

Employer Description. *Providing necessary job related information to other employees* align with the core values (i.e. " teamwork, communication and friendliness") of the business participant of this survey. Employer 2 stated that providing job related information to other employees "helps the team operate uniformly and smoothly."

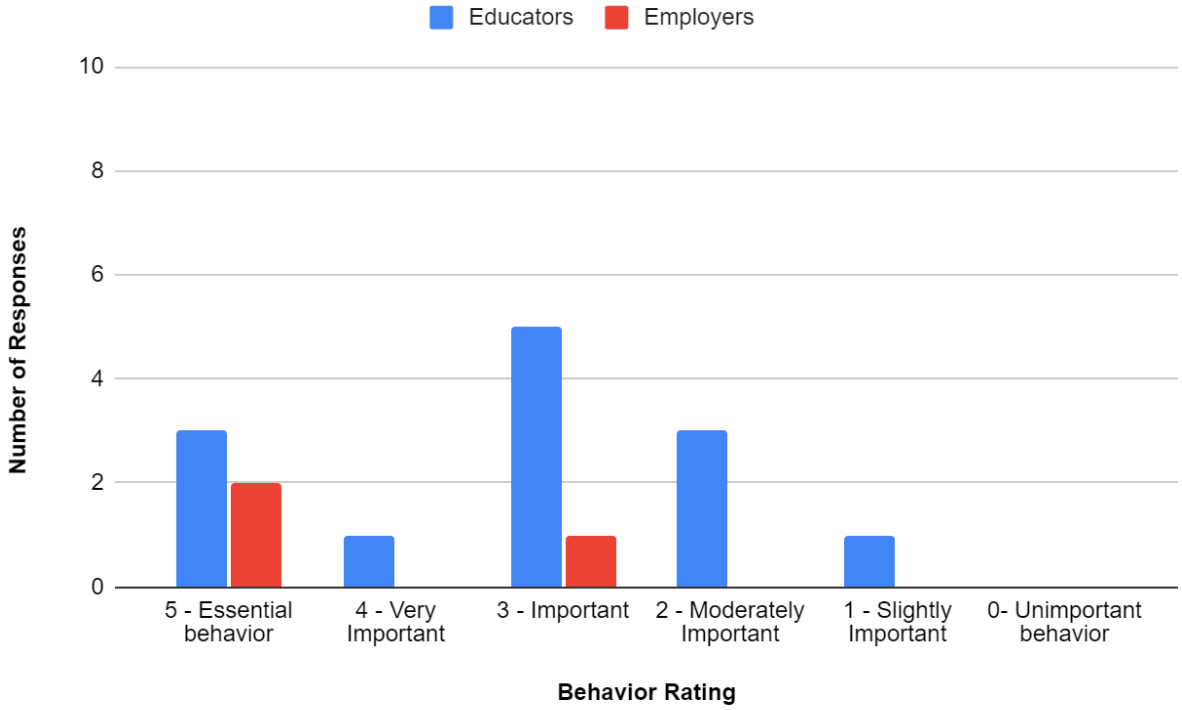
Educator Description. Collaborating with fellow employees by sharing knowledge and information that one may be an expert in is important for the overall success of a business. Employees have individual strengths and sharing knowledge with others will make everyone's work more efficient. *Providing job related information to other employees* may not be within the job duties of an employee unless they have been promoted to a mentor or trainer role. Several educators noted that providing information to employees may only be the role of a supervisor and not the responsibility of an entry-level employee. Additionally, if a coworker is becoming a burden by asking for information from fellow employees, a supervisor may need to be notified.

Offering to Help Coworkers

Employers' ranked *offering to help coworkers* as the fourth most important behavior with a 4.33 average. Educators ranked this behavior as 12th most important with 3.15 average ratings of importance, which is a tie with *providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work*. *Offering to help coworkers* demonstrated the largest difference in ranking among all 14 behaviors with an eight point difference in rank of importance between educators and employers. Similar to other behaviors with lower average ratings and lesser importance rankings, *offering to help coworkers* received varied ratings from slightly important to essential for employment success (see Figure 16).

Figure 16

Ratings of Importance for Offering to Help Coworkers



Reasons for Importance. *Offering to help coworkers* was also considered less important because it may not be a priority for an employee since they have their own tasks to complete. Offering to help "is not important to maintaining a job position" since completing one's own tasks is more important to maintaining a job. Offering to help is more important when it comes to building relationships with coworkers and increasing the effectiveness of a team.

Employer Description. Helping coworkers is a "huge part of … a small staff." Since the participating business has a relatively small staff, they are expected to "work together and help as needed." Helping as needed "helps foster a healthy peer dynamic."

Educator Description. *Offering to help coworkers* builds relationships and workplace morale. Being a "team player" and collaborating with peers increases the productivity and

efficiency of the business as a whole. When colleagues know a coworker may be available to assist in achieving a deadline, solve a difficult problem, or complete a difficult task, "people [are] more willing to come to work and to work harder at what they do."

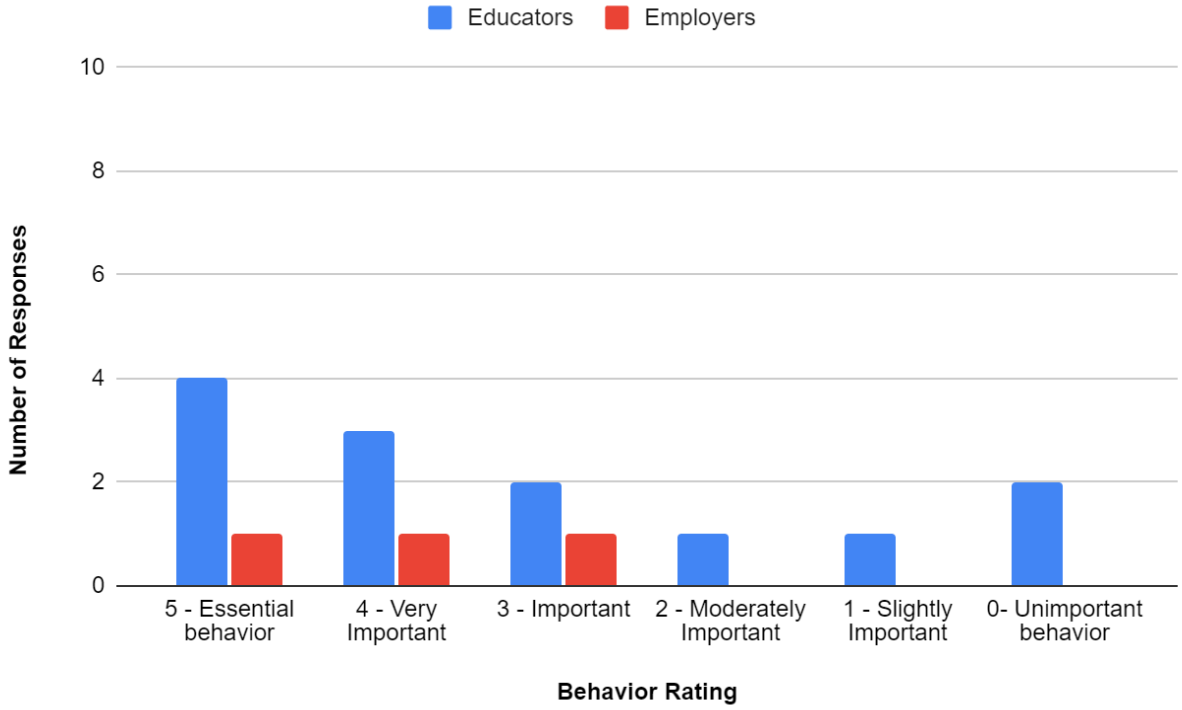
Many educators described *offering to help coworkers* as less important than other tasks. The lesser importance ratings were attributed to the lack of need or opportunity to offer help. Every employee in a company or business has specific assigned tasks, offering to help another employee with their tasks should only be done after the assigned tasks are completed otherwise productivity decreases. According to educator 3, offering to help colleagues may also "unintentionally impede the growth or understanding of the colleague" being offered the help.

Providing Reasonable Excuses When Late or Absent From Work

Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work was ranked 12th by employers with a 4.00 average rating of importance. According to educators, this behavior was tied for 12th most important with offering to help coworkers with an average rating of 3.15. Participants' ratings for this behavior ranged across all degrees of importance with no one indicator receiving a majority of the selections (see Figure 17).

Figure 17

Ratings of Importance for Providing Reasonable Excuses When Late or Absent



Reasons for Importance. Several educators indicated that the notification of an absence or delay is more important than having a reasonable excuse for the absence or delay. Acceptable reasons for absence should be infrequently occurring so *providing a reasonable excuse for an absence* should also be infrequently occurring. The irregularity of using this behavior contributed to the lesser importance ratings.

Employer Description. *Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work* may be providing a doctor's excuse. This behavior is important to build trust among coworkers.

Educator Description. From the educators' perspective, *providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work* shows professionalism, honesty, and the employee's understanding of how their time off works within a company. Professionalism includes, not only

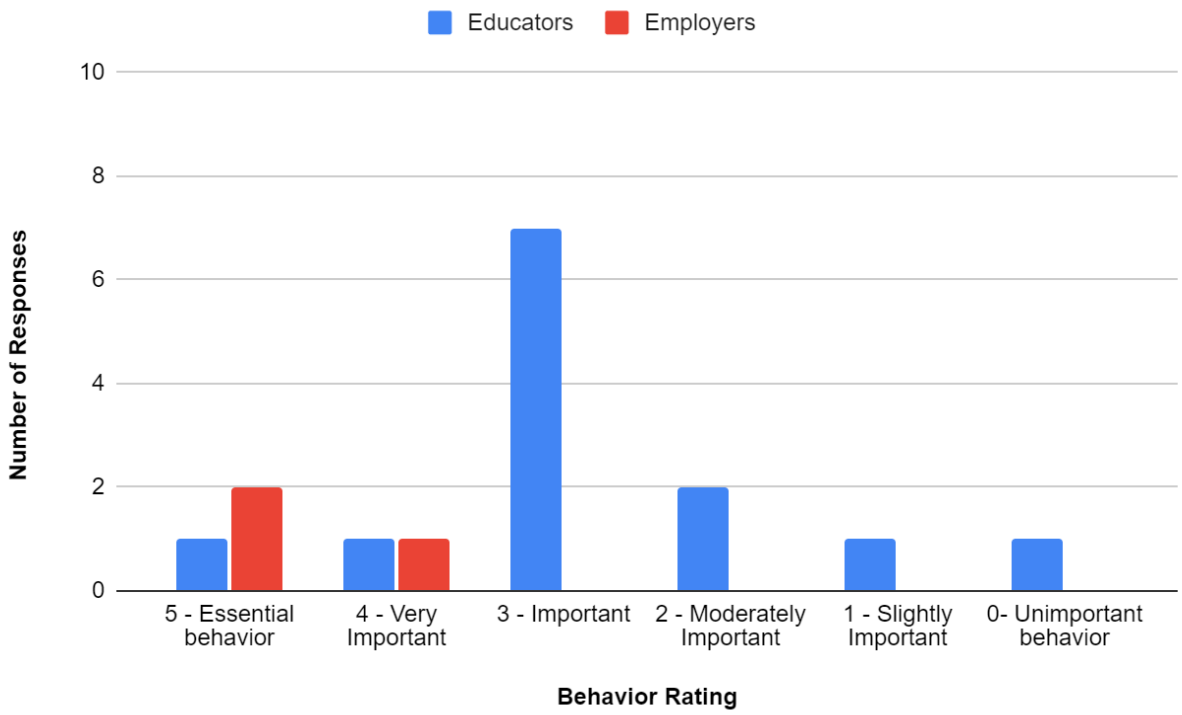
the reason for absence, but the notification prior to the absence, using sick time for illness or doctor visits only, and respectful actions towards supervisors and coworkers to maintain reliability. “Providing honest excuses is more important than reasonable” and “honesty is the best policy” are statements provided by educator 13. The need to provide a reasonable excuse should be an infrequent occurrence. An employee should have an understanding of how sick, personal, and/or vacation time works in their company. Excuses may not be required unless given certain circumstances including doctor visits where valid excuses can be provided and life situations including vehicle trouble, illness, and traffic.

Not Having Friends Around During On-The-Job Hours

Not having friends around during on-the-job hours is the only behavior in this study that exhibited a significant difference between employers’ and educators’ ratings of importance using the Wilcoxon rank sum test. Educators’ average rating was 2.69 and employers’ was 4.67 on the 0-5 likert scale. However, this behavior was ranked 14, least important, by both participant groups. Additionally, a majority of educators (n=7) rated this behavior as a 3 on the likert scale of importance but the remaining participants’ ratings varied across all levels of importance (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

Ratings of Importance for Not Having Friends Around During On-The-Job Hours



Reasons for Importance. Employers rated this behavior as very important or essential for employment success because of safety hazards and distractions. Educators gave lesser ratings of importance to *not having friends around during on-the-job hours* since colleagues may become the employee's friends. Additionally, educators noted that when coworkers are friends, the work environment is a more enjoyable place to be so *not having friends around* is less important.

Employer Description. Having friends around during on-the-job hours is "highly unprofessional" and may cause safety hazards. Additionally, the distraction of friends may keep an employee off task which could minimize success and a positive work environment.

Educator Description. Educators' responses indicated there are two types of friends, those you work with and those you don't. Friends of an employee not employed by the same business as the employee have potential to cause distractions and minimize task completion, but that may not always be the case. If an employee works in a customer service industry, for example a restaurant, and their friends want to eat at the restaurant, that should not be a problem unless the employee sits with the friends during a work shift. A "quality employee" would ask their friends not to come to their place of employment during work hours to "hang out."

In some cases, an employee's coworkers become friends. Having colleagues that are friends "can make the time go faster and [days would be more pleasant]." Being surrounded by people you get along with can make you more successful and is important for morale. Additionally, "going to work each day with no friends around would [make] for incredibly long, painful days."

Differences in Employers' and Educators' Descriptions of Behaviors

Research question 3 aimed to determine the differences, if any, between employers' and educators' descriptions and ratings of importance of task-related social behaviors. Several behaviors were described using similar words and phrases however there were also some behaviors employer perspectives differed from educators. Behaviors rated with lesser importance often resulted in more discrepancy between educators and employers descriptions.

Finding Necessary Information Prior to Performing the Job. Employers ranked this behavior eighth most important and described it from the individual task standpoint, meaning that an employee may be assigned a new or unfamiliar task and, for the sake of efficiency, the employee should gather information prior to starting to eliminate wasted time redoing the task. Yet educators ranked this behavior as sixth most important and interpreted *finding necessary*

information prior to performing the job from the education or prior training standpoint. Some educators indicated that many job positions require certification or training prior to obtaining the job. These results suggest a difference in interpretation of the word job. Seemingly, educators perceive a job as a position within a company but employers perceive a job as a task to be completed.

Notifying a Supervisor When Assistance is Needed. Employers indicated that *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* should be a natural occurrence since supervisors are in place to aid in the employee learning the job. However, some educators made the point that notifying a supervisor may not always be necessary since assistance could be provided by colleagues rather than seeking a higher level supervisor. The similarity between educators' and employers' views was found when comparing the supervising employers' perspectives with the educators that also hold a supervisory role of administration. With regard to *notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed*, those in supervisory roles, in education or business, seem to prefer to be asked questions as it develops trust. Those in supervisory roles also speculated that subordinate employees may not want to ask questions and appear "incompetent." *Notifying a supervisor when assistance is needed* was ranked as sixth and seventh most important by employers and educators, respectively. Again, the lesser importance, the more discrepancy in description between educators and employers.

Working on a Task Instead of Talking to a Coworker. Descriptions of this behavior varied within each group rather than between the two groups. Employer 3 took the perspective that the task was not getting completed leading to the potential for unbudgeted overtime costs. Whereas employer 2 agreed with many of the educators that task completion could occur while talking and building relationships making a place of employment an enjoyable place to be. Many

of the opinions shared indicate that talking to a coworker while completing a task adds to a positive work environment which may be more important to employment success than the ability to maintain focus on a task without building positive relationships with coworkers. The ability to socialize with coworkers while accomplishing tasks is a "normal feature of what people in our society do and how they are perceived" (Wehman, 2011. p.147). Socialization with coworkers, for people with disabilities, enhances quality of life.

Carrying out Instructions Needing Attention After Time has Elapsed. Employers described this behavior as receiving an instruction for a task that is vital to the business but not urgent. Some educators seemed to interpret the word *elapsed* as *expired* indicating that a task potentially should not even be completed if the time to complete it had elapsed. One educator gave an example: if an employee fails to make a food order for a customer on a certain day there would be no need to make the food order on the following day. Educators ranked this behavior as less important, potentially because of the interpretation of the term elapsed, indicating if the time to complete a task has expired carrying out the instruction is less important. The difference in employers' and educators' descriptions of this behavior stem from different interpretations of the wording of the behavior and not necessarily a true difference of opinion.

Providing Necessary Job Related Information to Other Employees. Employers noted this behavior aligns with business values of teamwork and efficient business practices. Some educators noted that providing information to other employees may not be the responsibility of an entry-level employee. Educators suggested this behavior falls within the assigned duties for a person in a mentor or training role or a supervisor. These findings indicate the employers in this study value collaboration and cooperation while some of the educator participants value having an understanding of one's own job description and completing tasks within that role.

Offering to Help Coworkers. Similar to *providing necessary job related information to other employees*, some educators indicate that *offering to help coworkers* may not be in the job description of an employee therefore not a necessary behavior. Additionally, some educators noted that offering to help a coworker may impede their growth and skill development; however, employers seemed more appreciative of offered help, stating work is a better place to be when help is offered. These findings again highlight the values shared among some educators that each individual employee should strive to complete their own assigned tasks before relating information or offering help to coworkers. Given the largest difference in rank order, a difference of description was expected between employers and educators.

Not Having Friends Around During On-The-Job Hours. Employers noted the potential for distractions, unprofessionalism and safety hazards caused by friends, however, educators noted that coworkers may become friends and therefore would be around during work hours. Educators suggested coworker friends would add to the positive environment of the workplace rather than the negative effects suggested by employers. Due to the significant difference in importance between educators and employers, the discrepancy in descriptions was expected.

Behaviors with Similar Descriptions Among Educators and Employers

Employers and educators provided similar descriptions for several behaviors including seeking clarification for unclear instructions, working as a team and interacting with customers and clients. Additionally, these three behaviors were also agreed upon by both groups as the top three most important behaviors. Employers and educators described *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* as asking for more or clearer directions for the ultimate purpose of enabling a business to operate with greater efficiency. *Working as a team* was also described with the

purpose of efficient business operations. *Interacting well with customers and clients* was described as creating positive experiences for customers especially when a business is dependent on customers for continued operation. These results suggest that when agreement exists between employers and educators with a higher level of importance there is also agreement with descriptions and reasons for the importance of a behavior.

Additional agreement was found between *responding appropriately to critical feedback* and *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention.* The importance of these behaviors was also somewhat agreed upon by employers and educators. Educators ranked *responding appropriately to critical feedback* as the fourth most important and *carrying out instructions needing immediate attention* as fifth most important while employers ranked them as fifth and sixth, respectively. These behaviors are ranked higher in the overall list of task-related social behaviors by employers and educators as well as have similar descriptions provided by both groups. This finding also indicates that when there is agreement for a higher level of importance, there is also agreement in description and reason for importance.

Agreement exists between employers and educators regarding the behavior *referring customers to someone qualified to handle the task*. Both groups ranked this behavior as eighth most important and indicated providing top customer service ensures business success. When an employee has an understanding of their own skills as well as their coworkers' strengths the customer receives the best service. These results suggest that agreement in rating of importance also indicates agreement in description and reason for importance.

A final behavior employers and educators provided similar descriptions for was *providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work.* This behavior was ranked with lesser importance by both groups, specifically 12th most important out of the 14 behaviors surveyed.

Both groups provided similar descriptions; however, educators suggested that the act of notifying a supervisor of the absence may be more important than the reason. These results indicate the list of provided behaviors may not include the most essential behaviors for employment success. Studies exploring essential employability skills should be regularly updated due to evolving knowledge and social expectations (Ju et al., 2012).

Summary

Educators and employers have similar views regarding the importance of and descriptions for some task-related social behaviors. However, there are also several behaviors in which there is disagreement in importance ratings and descriptions. The next chapter will address implications and recommendations for employers and educators to create mutual understanding of importance and description between the two groups in order to better prepare students with and without disabilities for successful employment. Several themes were interwoven among numerous task-related social behaviors, including relationships and a positive work environment, effectiveness and efficiency of individuals and businesses, growth, and professionalism. These themes as well as implications and recommendations for employers and educators will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter interprets the results of the educators and employers opinions and descriptions of task-related social behaviors that are important for entry-level employees. Suggestions are made for education professionals regarding why instruction on task-related social behavior should be included in transition programs for students with disabilities. Also included in this chapter are suggestions for future research to further increase potential employment success.

Relevance of Study and Findings

Employment is a way of life and potentially means to social interactions for most people in the United States. Unfortunately, for people with disabilities, employment is often less stable or certain than for people without disabilities. One potential factor for people with disabilities to be underemployed or unemployed compared to nondisabled counterparts is the lack of skills necessary for employment demonstrated by people with disabilities. While in school, students with disabilities receive individualized instruction, services, and activities to prepare them for postsecondary outcomes including employment. Employment preparation activities may include work experience within community settings, if appropriate. Despite the availability of numerous structured programs, secondary transition efforts continue to lack inclusion of instruction for specific skills necessary for successful employment. Previous research indicates that employers value task-related behaviors as most important for employment success but educators provide instruction most frequently on social behaviors (Agran et al., 2016; Salzburg et al., 1986). This study focused on comparing employers and educators perspectives regarding the overlap of the two areas. The participants ranked and described the importance of 14 task-related social

behaviors for entry-level employment with hopes of determining behaviors that should be included in secondary transition programming.

Summary of Study and Findings

This mixed methods study analyzed employers' and educators' perspectives regarding the importance of and descriptions for previously identified task-related social behaviors and answers the following research questions:

1. How are employability skills that are task related and social described by employers and educators?
2. Which task-related social behaviors are viewed as most important by employers and educators as necessary for employment success in entry-level job positions?
3. How do the views of importance and the descriptions of employability skills differ between employers and educators?

The results of the current study align with previous research concluding task-related social behaviors are important for employment and adds to the research indicating possible reasons for the importance. Additionally, this study determined which specific task-related social behaviors are most important according to educators and employers in one rural area. Employers and educators agree *seeking clarification for unclear instructions, working as a team,* and *interacting well with customers or clients* are the three most important of the 14 behaviors surveyed. As agreement in ranking of importance decreased between the two participant groups so did the similarities in descriptions of each behavior.

Findings Related to Previous Research

The findings of this study align with previous research indicating *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* is ranked as the most important task-related social behavior by educators

(Agran et al., 2016) and the second most important task-related social behavior by employers (Salzburg et al., 1986). As employer 3 noted, seeking clarification "saves time" and as evident throughout educator responses, enables businesses to operate more efficiently. Interacting well with customers or clients and working as a team were ranked as fifth and sixth most important, respectively, according to educators but were not rated by employers in previous research (Agran et al., 2016). These results suggest behaviors evolve and the importance fluctuates over time indicating a need for repeated studies specific to a locality or point in time (Ju et al., 2012).

Agran et al., (2016) suggested further research participants should justify or give reason why a behavior was important and such insight would indicate why a behavior required specific instruction for students with disabilities. Underlying themes throughout employers' and educators' descriptions in this study, indicate task-related social behaviors can develop relationships, create positive work conditions, enable businesses to operate efficiently, foster personal growth for employees, and cultivate a professional environment that values customers or clients. These findings are similar to the suggestions of Wehman (2011) that employment enhances socialization and community for people with disabilities.

Impacts on Key Groups

Implications and Recommendations for Educators

Results of this study could enhance secondary transition programs for students with disabilities. Future programs and work experience opportunities for students could include assessment, direct instruction, and opportunity for practice of the specific behaviors viewed as important by employers. This study may be a starting point to develop a secondary transition assessment to determine a student's current use of task-related social behaviors in school and community settings. Such an assessment would guide educators to the specific behaviors that a

student needs to be successful in workplace settings. Add to that, the specific skills that employers value, students will have opportunity for direct instruction and opportunity for practice in actual settings with a focus on the necessary skills for a specific setting.

Following the assessment, educators may be able to provide transition instruction specific to a student's level of ability and career goals. By considering the specific task-related social behaviors that employers value and a student may be lacking, educators can create opportunities for explicit instruction and practice in community settings. When students, especially those with disabilities, have the opportunity to develop skills in authentic workplace settings, the skills become a natural part of the students' repertoire of skills (Cook 2002).

Educators may seek to develop an assessment to determine students' ability to demonstrate important task-related social behaviors in order to determine which specific skills a particular student needs instruction to display. Such an assessment could take the form of an ecological assessment that identifies the skills needed for certain work environments (Rowe et al., 2015). Assessments determining a students' ability levels for task-related social behaviors can also be specific to an individual student's chosen field of employment or business.

Educators can start in the classroom by assisting students in developing the foundational skills that will lead to the most important behaviors for employment success. Taking just the top three most important behaviors as an example, educators can facilitate *asking for clarification* rather than just providing directions in several ways. This may be counterintuitive for educators who are trained to repeat directions, differentiate instruction, and ensure success. Research results spanning more than 30 years indicate *seeking clarification for unclear instructions* is consistently one of the most important task-related social behaviors for employees (Agran et al., 2016; Salzburg et al., 1986). It is necessary for educators to provide instruction and opportunity

for students to develop this skill. Educators frequently provide opportunities for students to work as a team on projects. Given *working as a team* was ranked in the top three most important task-related social behaviors by both employers and educators, educators should continue to provide opportunities for students to develop their ability for success in future employment settings. Educators can highlight to students the importance of the ability to work with others for employment success as well as assist the students in gaining an understanding of their own strengths which helps the group complete projects more efficiently. The final behavior ranked in the top three most important is *interacting well with customers and clients*. Without customers in a classroom, educators may find it difficult to provide instruction specific to this behavior. However, educators can foster the foundational skills for this behavior including, professional language, tidy appearance, eye contact, and respectful conversations.

Educators should consider all task-related social behaviors when preparing students for postsecondary employment. Due to the individualization of special education instruction, educators may consider reaching out to businesses in the surrounding area in which students are considering seeking employment to determine the specific skills required and valued by a particular business. By gaining an understanding of the expectations for a specific location, teachers may begin to assist students in developing the necessary skills prior to obtaining employment.

This study may serve as a starting point for educators to complete informal inquiries regarding specific skills valued by businesses in communities surrounding schools. These inquiries can lead to the development of an evaluation tool used to gauge students' acquisition of the specific skills the business values. Such a tool may be used to evaluate any student

participating in a work-based learning experience in a specific business or customized to ensure a particular student is gaining the necessary skills he or she needs to be successful in a career.

Additionally, given the discrepancy between employers' and educators' descriptions of several task-related social behaviors, educators should also consider participating in regular collaboration opportunities with businesses to facilitate ongoing discussion to develop common understanding of specific skills. It is important that educators are providing the necessary instruction for students, however if there are misunderstandings of the expectations, students are ill prepared for employment. Furthermore, regular meetings with business leaders will enable educators to remain current with changing job market expectations (Ju et al., 2012).

Implications and Recommendations for Employers

If educators understand the specific skills that employers value, instruction can be provided for students with disabilities to develop the necessary skills leading to students ready to enter the workforce. Employers will be able to partner with schools to develop specific task lists to focus instruction for students participating in work experience in particular industries or specific businesses. Employers can collaborate with schools to develop the valued skills in the students to grow the workforce from the local community.

Employers should seek to invite educators to observe business operations and employee interactions with peers, supervisors, and, if applicable, customers and clients. Through first hand experience of the expectations, educators will be able to customize instruction specific to business needs. Additionally, because of knowledge of their students strengths, educators will be able to suggest career pathways for students that will capitalize on individual strengths.

Employers should also consider creating opportunities for students to participate in work-based learning experiences. When students with disabilities have the opportunity to

participate in jobs tasks in authentic work place settings they increase skill acquisition, knowledge of expectations and opportunities (Luecking & Crane, 2020). By businesses opening their doors to students and collaborating with educators to develop the specific skills necessary, businesses train potential future employees, educators provide meaningful experiences, and students develop a skill set valued by an employer they are interested in pursuing a career with. Students with disabilities have the potential to develop the necessary skills for employment during work-based learning experiences in addition, they may receive credits towards graduation. During work-based learning experiences, students should be regularly evaluated on the development of the necessary skills. Employers should work together with educators to develop an evaluation tool specific to a work site or job placement to ensure students are developing the necessary skills valued by the specific place of employment.

A final recommendation for employers is directly tied to a recommendation for educators, participate in regular meetings to develop common understanding of important workplace skills. Educators will provide instruction for students with disabilities to prepare for future employment, however, that instruction may be ineffective if misunderstandings continue to exist in descriptions of important workplace behaviors. Employers and educators should regularly meet to develop common language so that appropriate instruction is provided to students seeking employment.

Implications and Recommendations for Students

Although students were not a part of this research study, they are beneficiaries of the knowledge gained. Students with disabilities may receive more specific instruction that will allow them to be successful in their chosen postsecondary career fields. Participation in work experiences during high school with specific instruction on the necessary skills increases the

prospect of future employment (Baer et al., 2003; Bellman et al., 2014; Benz et al., 2000; Hasazi et al., 1989; McConnell et al., 2012; Test et al., 2009). This study indicates specific task-related social behaviors that employers value. Students should seek to develop the necessary behaviors, as well as understand why they are important for workplace settings.

Students may also gain stronger self-awareness through assessments that specifically measure skills valued by employers. When students have an understanding of the skills they need to be successful in their chosen career fields, they can develop those skills in the supported settings of the schools. Through collaboration efforts between employers and educators, students will be able to receive instruction to develop skills for a specific industry or business.

Once students graduate from high school, they should continue to develop the necessary skills for sustained employment. Some of the skills evaluated in this study are important because they foster personal growth, specifically *responding appropriately to critical feedback* and *finding information prior to performing a job*. When individuals are able to accept feedback, positive or negative, in an appropriate manner, workplaces are more productive which leads to better customer service and sustained employment for the individual. Similarly, finding information prior to performing a task when the task is newly assigned saves time and improves the production of the business. Furthermore, the same task may be completed more quickly during future occurrences. Individuals should seek to apply necessary task-related social behaviors while in school as students but also throughout employment as adults.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future researchers may want to consider grouping the 14 task-related social behaviors into smaller sections to reduce survey fatigue. The list of previously identified behaviors could be categorized into three groups: building relationships with coworkers, interacting with a

supervisor, and responding to customers. By grouping the behaviors and gathering data on the three general categories rather than the 14 specific behaviors, researchers may find other specific behaviors that are more important. Additionally, a shorter survey has potential for more participants and the likelihood of obtaining equal groups of employers and educators for more valid comparison. Furthermore, a larger representation of employers may demonstrate differences in importance for essential behaviors within various industry categories.

Focusing a study within a specific industry category may also highlight the specific skills that are important to particular industries. For example, *interacting well with customers or clients* or *referring customers to someone qualified to handle the task*, may be viewed as less important in an industry in which employees have minimal interactions with customers. Additionally, finding the important skills for a specific industry may help middle school educators provide instruction to students that are uncertain of a specific job or business they want to pursue a career at but are beginning to explore general industry categories.

Future research may also reevaluate other behaviors that were previously identified as important for employment success, for example the skills indicated by Ju et al. (2012, 2014). Researchers may consider a study in which employers and educators openly suggest important behaviors then provide ratings of importance. Other behaviors that are task related but not social or behaviors that are social but not task related may be of greater or lesser importance than the behaviors rated in this study.

Gaining the student or entry-level employee perspective and understanding of task-related social behaviors may also be beneficial to educators and employers so misunderstandings could be eliminated and employer expectations could be achieved. Additionally, obtaining the student or entry-level employee perspective could provide a list of

behaviors that make the student or employee feel valued as an employee therefore aiding in development of necessary skills.

Conclusions

Employment gives people purpose in life, the ability to provide for themselves and others, and potentially develop social relationships. Without the necessary skills, especially for people with disabilities, employment may not be possible. There needs to be alignment between career instruction in schools and employer expectations so employment is more likely. The alignment needs to include mutual understanding of the skills that are important to a business or industry as well as consensus of what those skills look like in the workplace setting.

Research question 1 of this study, demonstrates several behaviors educators and employers describe in similar ways. There are also several behaviors that demonstrate a misalignment in the understanding between the two groups. Results of this study indicate more alignment between employers' and educators' descriptions of behavior when there is a higher level of importance for a behavior. Given the two participant groups ranked the same behaviors as the three most important for employment success, some agreement is apparent for research question 2. Additionally, the average importance ratings of the behaviors by both groups indicate that as a whole, task-related social behaviors are essential for employment success. The ability to demonstrate appropriate social behaviors while completing work tasks, strengthens peer relationships, stimulates personal growth, and builds business success. Finally, considering the lack of significant difference between educators and employers ratings of importance for most behaviors, one must consider the difference in description of the behaviors. While the behaviors are evaluated as important, the educators' and employers' interpretation and understanding of the behavior must be taken into account when providing instruction. Regarding research question 3,

the views of importance of employability skills do not demonstrate significant difference between the two groups. There are several behaviors that indicate a contrast in descriptions between the two groups suggesting some disagreement and difference of opinion.

These results indicate more collaboration is needed for students with disabilities to have a seamless transition from high school to employment. The collaboration will enable students to develop the skills to be successful, schools to provide meaningful education, and businesses to have a part in cultivating future employees. Businesses and schools can work together to develop a workforce that will support themselves and the surrounding community for years to come.

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Appendix A
Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

SlipperyRock University of Pennsylvania

TO: Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey
Special Education

FROM: _____
James Preston, D.Ed., Vice-Chairperson
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

DATE: February 22, 2023

RE: Protocol Approved

Protocol #: 2023-068-88-B
Protocol Title: Employability Skills and Students with Disabilities

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University has received and reviewed the requested modification(s) to the above-referenced protocol utilizing the expedited review process. The IRB has approved the protocol effective February 22, 2023.

You may begin your project as of February 22, 2023. Your approved protocol will expire on February 21, 2024. You will need to submit a Progress/Final Report at least 7 days prior to the expiration date.

Enclosed are copies of the approved consent and assent forms to be copied for participants to sign. (if applicable)

If you complete the study within the next year, please notify the IRB with a Final Report. The Final Report form and instructions can be found on the IRB website.

Please contact the IRB Office by phone at (724)738-4846 or via email at irb@sru.edu should your protocol change in any way.

Appendix B
Site Permission Request for School District

Dear Superintendent:

I am seeking permission to conduct research at the Heritage Area School District. In addition to serving as the school district's transition coordinator, I am studying for a doctoral degree from Slippery Rock University of PA. My research study is titled "Employability Skills and Students with Disabilities." Many students with disabilities seek entry-level employment directly out of high school which often requires on-the-job training rather than further education or certifications. In order to better prepare students for the current job market, I am seeking employers' and educators' opinions on important skills for employees to be successful. Prior to beginning my research, I will obtain approval from Slippery Rock University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This Board is in place to ensure protection of human rights and ethical treatment of research participants.

Once permission is granted and IRB approval is obtained, I will send an email with details about the study including access to an online survey to the teaching staff of the Heritage Area High School. Each educator participant will be given an explanation of the research project and their completion of the survey will serve as their consent to participate in the study. If an educator chooses to participate in the survey, they will provide ratings of importance for predetermined task-related skills as well as explanations regarding each skill. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes and personally identifying information will not be required. Additionally, individuals will not be required to participate in this study and may withdraw at any time without repercussions. The results of the study will be included in my doctoral dissertation and shared with staff members of local school districts in order to better prepare students for the workforce. Identifying information about individuals or businesses will not be included in any report of the data.

I am requesting written permission to conduct my research at the Heritage Area School District. A permission letter should be on the school district letterhead, signed, and dated. Please include my name (Karen A. Eppley) and title of my research project (Employability Skills and Students with Disabilities) in the permission letter. You may use the enclosed self addressed stamped envelope to return a letter if permission to conduct research in the Heritage Area School District is granted. If no permission letter is received by July 22, 2022, it will be understood that Heritage Area School District will not serve as a research site for this project. Thank you for your consideration.

If additional information is needed prior to granting permission, I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. You may also contact my faculty advisor and dissertation chairperson, Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey.

Appendix C
Site Permission Request for Businesses

Dear Business Official:

I am the transition coordinator for Heritage Area School District and a doctoral student at Slippery Rock University. I am completing a research study titled "Employability Skills and Students with Disabilities". This research study will compare educators' and employers' opinions about social skills that are necessary for employment. Prior to beginning this project, I am seeking written permission from businesses that will serve as research sites for employer participants in the study.

My research study is titled “Employability Skills and Students with Disabilities.” As transition coordinator, I work with high school students in preparation for life after high school. The students I support all have a diagnosed disability and may require assistance to prepare for their chosen careers. Many students with disabilities seek employment directly out of high school that requires on-the-job training rather than further education or certifications. In order to better prepare students for the current job market, I am seeking employers’ and educators’ opinions on important skills for employees to be successful. Prior to beginning my research, I will seek approval from Slippery Rock University’s Institutional Review Board. This Board is in place to ensure protection of human rights and ethical treatment of research participants.

If your business opts to be a research site, I will send a follow up email with more details about the study and access to an online survey. I ask that the survey link be shared with any person in a supervisory role. Each participant will be given an explanation of the research project and their completion of the survey will serve as their consent to participate in the study. If an individual chooses to participate in the survey, they will provide ratings of importance for predetermined task-related skills as well as explanations regarding each skill. Additionally, individual demographic information will be requested including the individual’s job title, years of service, and role within the company. Company demographics will also be requested including the size based on number of employees and industry or department category. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes and personally identifying information will not be required but may be provided.

The results of the study will be included in my doctoral dissertation and shared with staff members of local school districts in order to better prepare students for the workforce. Identifying information about individuals or businesses will not be included in any report of the data. Individuals will not be required to participate in this study and may withdraw at any time without repercussions.

If additional information is needed prior to granting permission, I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. You may also contact my faculty advisor and dissertation chairperson, Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey.

Appendix D
Email to Potential Employer Participants

Dear Human Resources Personnel,

This email is coming to you as a request to participate in a research study. I am a doctoral student at Slippery Rock University and this research study is being completed within the guidelines of the dissertation for a Doctorate in Special Education. This study seeks to compare the opinions of educators and employers regarding the importance of 14 task-related social behaviors. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to rate and provide descriptive information for each of the behaviors.

When you click the link below, you will see disclosure information including the purpose of the study, risks and benefits of your participation, confidential information, and informed consent. Please read the information carefully.

Click here for the disclosure information and the survey.

If you have questions or concerns about rights of a research study participant, you may contact me, Karen A. Eppley, or my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey.

Since this study is seeking the opinions of persons in a supervisory role, please forward the information in this email and the link to participate in the survey to managers, supervisors, team leads, and other supervisory personnel within your company.

Appendix E
Email to Potential Educator Participants

Dear Educator,

This email is coming to you as a request to participate in a research study. I am a doctoral student at Slippery Rock University and this research study is being completed within the guidelines of the dissertation for a Doctorate in Special Education. This study seeks to compare the opinions of educators and employers regarding the importance of 14 task-related social behaviors. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to rate and provide descriptive information for each of the behaviors.

When you click the link below, you will see disclosure information including the purpose of the study, risks and benefits of your participation, confidential information, and informed consent. Please read the information carefully.

Click here for the disclosure information and the survey.

If you have questions or concerns about rights of a research study participant, you may contact me, Karen A. Eppley, or my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Ashlea Rineer-Hershey.

Appendix F

Employer and Educator Survey Section 1 - Task-Related Social Behaviors

1. Please select the 3 **most important** behaviors for an employee to display in order to maintain success.
   a. Seeking clarification for unclear instructions
   b. Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention
   c. Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed
   d. Responding appropriately to critical feedback
   e. Finding necessary information prior to performing the job
   f. Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work
   g. Referring customers/clients to someone qualified to handle the task
   h. Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed
   i. Offering to help coworkers
   j. Working on a task instead of talking to coworkers
   k. Providing job related information to other employees
   l. Not having friends around during on-the-job hours
   m. Working as a member of a team, if appropriate
   n. Interacting well with customers / clients

2. Please select the 3 **least important** behaviors for an employee to display in order to maintain success.
   a. Seeking clarification for unclear instructions
   b. Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention
   c. Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed
   d. Responding appropriately to critical feedback
   e. Finding necessary information prior to performing the job
   f. Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work
   g. Referring customers/clients to someone qualified to handle the task
   h. Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed
   i. Offering to help coworkers
   j. Working on a task instead of talking to coworkers
   k. Providing job related information to other employees
   l. Not having friends around during on-the-job hours
   m. Working as a member of a team, if appropriate
   n. Interacting well with customers / clients

Directions: For each behavior listed, please provide a rating of 0 through 5, where 0 is "not important for employment success" and 5 is "essential for employment success" respond to the follow up questions for each behavior.

3. Seeking clarification for unclear instructions: 0 1 2 3 4 5
   3a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   3b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

4. Carrying out instructions needing immediate attention 0 1 2 3 4 5
   4a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   4b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

5. Notifying supervisor when assistance is needed 0 1 2 3 4 5
   5a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   5b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

6. Responding appropriately to critical feedback 0 1 2 3 4 5
   6a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   6b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

7. Finding necessary information prior to performing the job 0 1 2 3 4 5
   7a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   7b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

8. Providing reasonable excuses when late or absent from work 0 1 2 3 4 5
   8a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   8b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

9. Referring customers/clients to someone qualified to handle the task 0 1 2 3 4 5
   9a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
   9b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

10. Carrying out instructions needing attention after time has elapsed 0 1 2 3 4 5
   10a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.

10b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

11. Offering to help coworkers 0 1 2 3 4 5
11a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
11b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

12. Working on a task instead of talking to coworkers 0 1 2 3 4 5
12a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
12b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

13. Providing job related information to other employees 0 1 2 3 4 5
13a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
13b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

14. Not having friends around during on-the-job hours 0 1 2 3 4 5
14a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
14b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

15. Working as a member of a team, if appropriate 0 1 2 3 4 5
15a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
15b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

16. Interacting well with customers / clients 0 1 2 3 4 5
16a. Please explain the reasoning for your selection.
16b. Describe what this behavior means to you. Consider specific actions an employee would display when performing this behavior.

Appendix G

Employer Survey Section 2 - Demographics

1. What is your job title?

2. How long have you worked in this position?
    a. Less than 6 months
    b. 6-12 months
    c. 1-2 years
    d. 3-5 years
    e. More than 5 years

3. How many employees do you directly supervise?
    a. 1-4
    b. 5-10
    c. 11 or more

4. What qualifications are necessary for employees that you supervise? (Check all that apply)
    a. Some high school education
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Other industry credentials (For example, Certified Welder, CDL, ServSafe Certification etc.)
    d. Unsure

5. To your knowledge, have you served in a supervisory role of at least one person with a disability within the last 5 years?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Unsure

6. Which of the following best describes the industry category for your company or department?
    a. Architecture and Construction including building and grounds maintenance
    b. Hospitality including Food service
    c. Business, Management, and Administration
    d. Health Science
    e. Marketing, Sales, and Service
    f. Other - Please specify

7. How many total employees are in your company?
    a. Less than 10
    b. 11-49
    c. 50-99
    d. 100 or more

8. If you would be willing to be contacted by the researcher to provide clarification or additional information, please include your name and preferred contact method: phone number or email address.

Appendix H
Educator Survey Section 2 - Demographics

1. How long have you been employed as an educator?
    a. 5 years or less
    b. 6-10 years
    c. 11-20 years
    d. 21 or more years

2. Which best describes your role in education?
    a. General education teacher
    b. Special education teacher
    c. Administration
    d. Other (including vocational teachers, school counselors etc)

3. How many students do you provide instruction to during a typical school year?
    a. Less than 50
    b. 51-100
    c. More than 100

4. What is the age range of the majority of your students?
    a. 14-15 or younger
    b. 16-17
    c. 18 or older

5. If you would be willing to be contacted by the researcher to provide clarification or additional information, please include your name and preferred contact method: phone number or email address.