

Vocational Work Behaviour and Employability Skills among Persons with Intellectual Disability: A Comprehensive Review of Workplace Readiness and Employment Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Employment is an important dimension of adult life, providing opportunities for economic participation, social interaction, independence, personal identity, and community inclusion. However, persons with intellectual disability (ID) continue to experience substantial barriers to obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment. Successful employment depends not only on job-specific vocational competencies but also on vocational work behaviour and transferable employability skills. This comprehensive review examines vocational work behaviour and employability skills among persons with intellectual disability, with particular emphasis on workplace readiness and employment outcomes. The review synthesizes conceptual and empirical literature concerning vocational preparation, workplace behaviour, supported employment, job coaching, work-based learning, and employment sustainability. Key employability domains identified across the literature include punctuality, regular attendance, following instructions, task completion, work persistence, communication, teamwork, problem-

solving, adaptability, self-management, workplace safety, appropriate social interaction, and self-advocacy. Research by Agran et al. (2016) indicates that employment-related social skills, including seeking clarification, responding appropriately to feedback, requesting assistance, punctuality, and appropriate customer interaction, are highly valued in workplace settings. Gilson et al. (2017) demonstrated that employment skills can be systematically taught using diverse instructional approaches. Nevala et al. (2019) found evidence supporting supported employment, work experience, personal support, job coaching, family involvement, and supportive workplace environments. Carlson et al. (2020) further highlighted the importance of workplace supports for maintaining employment. Overall, the literature suggests that workplace readiness is multidimensional and emerges from the interaction between individual competencies and environmental supports. The review recommends integrated vocational programmes combining technical skills, employability training, authentic work experience, self-determination, employer engagement, individualized support, and

post-placement assistance to promote sustainable and inclusive employment for persons with intellectual disability.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, vocational work behaviour, employability skills, workplace readiness, supported employment, vocational rehabilitation, employment outcomes, workplace inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Employment is widely recognized as an important component of adult participation and social inclusion. For persons with intellectual disability, employment can provide income, social relationships, meaningful activity, increased independence, and a sense of purpose. Research has associated employment with psychosocial and economic benefits, including opportunities for friendship, social participation, and improved quality of life. Nevertheless, persons with intellectual disability continue to experience substantial barriers to participation in the open labour market. Nevala et al. (2019), in a systematic review of rehabilitation interventions, reported that supported employment and secondary education incorporating work experience and personal support were associated with improved employment outcomes, whereas sheltered employment did not produce comparable open-labour-market outcomes.

Employment success cannot be explained solely by whether an individual possesses a particular occupational skill. A worker may be able to perform a technical task but still experience difficulty maintaining employment because of problems with punctuality, attendance, communication, following instructions, responding to feedback, working cooperatively, adapting to changes, or asking for assistance. These behaviours form an important part of vocational work behaviour.

Vocational work behaviour may be understood as the observable pattern of task-related, interpersonal, motivational, and

self-management behaviours demonstrated by an individual during vocational preparation and employment. It includes punctuality, regular attendance, task initiation and completion, persistence, following instructions, communication, cooperation, responsibility, workplace safety, adaptability, and appropriate interaction with supervisors and co-workers. The concept is closely related to employability skills. Hillage and Pollard (1998) conceptualized employability as the capacity to obtain employment, maintain employment, and obtain new employment when required. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) subsequently argued that employability is multidimensional and should incorporate individual factors, personal circumstances, and labour-market conditions. Therefore, employability is not simply an individual's possession of skills; it is an interaction between personal capabilities and the employment environment. Yorke (2006) similarly described employability as a combination of achievements involving skills, understanding, and personal attributes that facilitate obtaining employment and succeeding in occupational roles. Pool and Sewell (2007) emphasized knowledge, transferable skills, emotional intelligence, career development learning, experience, and reflection.

These perspectives have particular relevance to persons with intellectual disability. Vocational preparation needs to address both job-specific competence and transferable workplace behaviour. Agran et al. (2016) found that highly valued employment social skills included seeking clarification when instructions were unclear, arriving at work on time, carrying out instructions requiring immediate attention, informing supervisors when assistance was needed, responding appropriately to critical feedback, and interacting appropriately with customers. Importantly, the skills perceived as most important were not always those most frequently taught.

Consequently, vocational work behaviour and employability skills should be regarded as central components of workplace readiness and transition planning for persons with intellectual disability.

Vocational Work Behaviour

Vocational work behaviour refers to the observable attitudes, habits, interpersonal responses, and task-related behaviours that an individual demonstrates in relation to vocational preparation, employment, and workplace participation. It includes behaviours such as punctuality, regular attendance, following instructions, task completion, work persistence, cooperation, communication, responsibility, adaptability, safety awareness, and appropriate interaction with supervisors and co-workers. The literature on vocational behaviour has traditionally examined both preparatory and actual work experiences, linking individual characteristics with career development and workplace functioning. According to Super (1980), vocational development is part of a broader life-span process in which the worker role develops alongside other life roles. His life-span, life-space approach therefore provides an important foundation for understanding vocational behaviour as role performance influenced by personal development and social context. Phillips, Cairo, Blustein, and Myers (1988) considered vocational behaviour in relation to both career development and individuals' preparatory and actual work experiences. Swanson (1992) further highlighted the developmental nature of vocational behaviour and the reciprocal relationship between work and non-work domains. For persons with intellectual disabilities, vocational work behaviour is especially important because successful employment involves more than acquiring specific occupational skills. Research also indicates that job content, workplace interaction, organizational culture, employer support, and job coaching can influence obtaining and maintaining employment among people with intellectual disabilities. Thus, vocational work behaviour can be

understood as a significant bridge between vocational training, workplace readiness, job performance, and employment retention. Its systematic assessment and development are particularly relevant for improving employment outcomes and workplace participation among persons with intellectual disabilities.

For persons with intellectual disability, vocational work behaviour has a particularly functional meaning because employment requires observable behaviours that can be taught and assessed in real work environments. Major dimensions include:

1. **Attendance and punctuality** - Regular attendance and punctuality are fundamental workplace expectations. A worker needs to arrive at the workplace according to the required schedule and maintain consistent participation. These skills can be supported through calendars, visual schedules, alarms, travel training, rehearsal, and systematic instruction.
2. **Following instructions** - Employees must understand and carry out verbal, written, visual, or demonstrated instructions. Individuals with intellectual disability may benefit from task analysis, simplified instructions, visual prompts, demonstrations, repetition, and opportunities to practice tasks in authentic environments.
3. **Task persistence** - Work persistence refers to continuing a task until it is completed despite difficulty, distraction, or temporary failure. It is particularly relevant to productivity and job retention.
4. **Communication** - Workplace communication includes greeting supervisors and colleagues, asking questions, reporting problems, requesting assistance, receiving instructions, and communicating with customers.
5. **Social interaction** - Appropriate workplace social behaviour includes cooperation, respect for personal boundaries, responding appropriately to

feedback, sharing resources, and maintaining professional relationships.

6. **Adaptability** - Workplaces involve changing tasks, schedules, procedures, technology, supervisors, and customer requirements. Flexibility is therefore an important employability competency.
7. **Self-management** - Self-management includes monitoring one's behaviour, managing time, maintaining attention, regulating responses, and recognizing when assistance is required.
8. **Workplace safety** - Safety behaviour includes recognizing hazards, following safety rules, using equipment appropriately, and reporting unsafe situations.

Thus, vocational work behaviour is broader than technical job performance. It represents the behavioural foundation that allows technical skills to be successfully applied in real employment situations.

Employability Skills

Employability skills refer to the combination of knowledge, practical abilities, personal qualities, attitudes, and transferable competencies that enable an individual to obtain employment, perform effectively, adapt to workplace demands, retain employment, and progress in a career. Employability is therefore broader than technical or job-specific competence. It includes communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, reliability, initiative, adaptability, learning ability, and interpersonal skills. The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasizes that employability involves the capacity to secure and retain employment, cope with workplace change, and acquire new skills as labour-market requirements evolve. Hillage and Pollard (1998) conceptualized employability in terms of an individual's capacity to obtain initial employment, maintain employment, and obtain new employment when required. Their framework established employability as a dynamic process rather than simply a collection of occupational skills. McQuaid

and Lindsay (2005) argued that employability should not be reduced to individual skills alone. They proposed a broader framework incorporating individual factors, personal circumstances, and external labour-market factors. Thus, employability is influenced by both what an individual can do and the opportunities and conditions available in the employment environment. Yorke (2006) viewed employability as a combination of achievements, including skills, understanding, and personal attributes, which enables individuals to obtain employment and succeed in their occupations. Similarly, Pool and Sewell (2007) emphasized the contribution of subject knowledge, transferable skills, emotional intelligence, career-development learning, experience, and reflection to the development of employability. The importance of transferable and soft skills has increased with changes in the contemporary labour market. The ILO (2021) identified core skills for life and work as important for personal and professional development and adaptation to changing work environments. The ILO also highlighted communication, problem-solving, self-management, and related soft skills as increasingly important to employers. For persons with intellectual disabilities, employability skills have particular importance because successful employment requires more than mastery of a vocational task. Wehman (2011) emphasized the importance of effective employment supports and opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate meaningfully in the workforce. Relevant skills include punctuality, attendance, following instructions, communication, workplace safety, task persistence, cooperation, self-advocacy, problem-solving, adaptability, and appropriate workplace behaviour. Thus, employability skills form an important link between vocational education, work readiness, job acquisition, workplace performance, and employment retention. Their systematic

development is particularly relevant to vocational rehabilitation and transition planning for persons with intellectual disabilities.

In the context of intellectual disability, employability skills may be grouped into five broad domains:

1. **Personal management** - Punctuality, attendance, grooming, responsibility, self-control.
2. **Task performance** - Following instructions, accuracy, persistence, task completion.
3. **Communication** - Asking questions, requesting assistance, reporting problems.
4. **Social competence** - Teamwork, cooperation, appropriate interaction, accepting feedback.
5. **Career management** - Decision-making, self-advocacy, adaptability, job seeking.

Review of Research Evidence

Venkatesh et al. (2023) examined vocational training programmes from trainers' perspectives in seven centres in Bengaluru. Major barriers included limited programme awareness, transition difficulties, challenges in external job placement, stigma, and negative attitudes. The findings indicate that completing vocational training does not ensure employment, highlighting the need for coordinated stakeholder support.

Taubner, Tideman, and Nyman (2022) emphasized that vocational success extends beyond obtaining a job. Employment sustainability involves maintaining employment, meaningful workplace participation, appropriate working conditions, and adequate support. Their perspective highlights the importance of long-term employment participation rather than focusing solely on initial job placement as the primary employment outcome.

Carlson, Morningstar, and Munandar (2020) reviewed 14 studies involving 85 employees with intellectual disability and 57 support providers. Interventions primarily focused on workplace performance, social

integration, and employment maintenance. However, no intervention specifically addressed career advancement, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on promotion, occupational mobility, and long-term career development.

Nevala et al. (2019) found that work experience, personal support, and supported employment improved employment opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities. Barriers included sheltered work, discrimination, classroom-based teaching, and limited work experience. Facilitators included family support, job coaching, supportive workplaces, employer assistance, and practical employment experience during secondary education.

Gilson, Carter, and Biggs (2017) reviewed 56 studies involving 766 participants and found that employment skills can be systematically taught using varied methods, including technology, self-management, video, visual supports, direct instruction, AAC, simulation, and peer instruction. Their findings support individualized, practical, visual, technology-assisted, and experiential vocational training approaches. Agran, Hughes, Thoma, and Scott (2016) found that workplace social skills such as punctuality, seeking clarification, following urgent instructions, requesting assistance, responding to feedback, and appropriate customer interaction were highly valued. However, these skills were not always adequately taught. The findings highlight the need to align vocational curricula with workplace expectations.

Gomes-Machado, Santos, Schoen, and Chiari (2016) found that vocational training improved adaptive skills among persons with mild or moderate intellectual disability. Labour-market inclusion was also associated with greater autonomy, learning, social relationships, and participation. Their findings support linking vocational preparation with community employment rather than limiting training to isolated skill development.

Ellenkamp et al. (2016) systematically reviewed 26 studies and identified

workplace factors influencing competitive employment, including employer attitudes, job content, workplace interaction, culture, and job-coach support. Their findings demonstrate that employment depends not only on individual abilities but also on supportive workplace environments, highlighting the importance of an ecological approach to inclusion.

Workplace Readiness among Persons with Intellectual Disability

Workplace readiness represents the extent to which an individual possesses the skills and behaviours necessary to enter and function effectively within a work environment. For persons with intellectual disability, workplace readiness can be assessed across the following areas:

- **Personal readiness** - Personal hygiene, appropriate dress, punctuality, attendance and responsibility.
- **Cognitive and task readiness** - Understanding instructions, attention, memory for work routines, task completion and problem-solving.
- **Social readiness** – Communication, teamwork, appropriate interaction, accepting feedback and conflict management.
- **Behavioural readiness** - Self-control, work persistence, flexibility, safety awareness and appropriate responses to supervision.
- **Community readiness** - Independent travel, use of public transportation, money management, knowledge of workplace rights and responsibilities.

Workplace readiness should therefore be assessed in functional settings rather than solely through paper-and-pencil tests.

Relationship between Employability Skills and Employment Outcomes

The literature suggests that employability skills influence several stages of the employment process:

- **Job acquisition** - Communication, interview behaviour, self-presentation, self-advocacy, and vocational decision-

making can influence access to employment.

- **Job performance** - Following instructions, technical competence, attention, work persistence and problem-solving influence daily performance.
- **Job retention** - Attendance, punctuality, social interaction, adaptability, communication, and response to feedback are important for maintaining employment.
- **Career development** - Self-advocacy, lifelong learning, adaptability, and decision-making become increasingly important as workers seek greater independence and occupational advancement.

Therefore, employability skills should be considered dynamic competencies rather than a fixed set of characteristics possessed before employment.

Role of Supported Employment and Job Coaching

Supported employment provides individualized assistance to enable people with intellectual disability to obtain and maintain employment in ordinary work environments. Job coaching may include - job-task analysis, demonstration, prompting, systematic instruction, performance feedback, social coaching, communication support, co-worker training, environmental modification, gradual fading of assistance and follow-up. Nevala et al. (2019) identified job coaching as an important facilitator of employment, while Carlson et al. (2020) demonstrated the relevance of workplace supports for career maintenance. The purpose of job coaching should not be permanent dependence. Rather, effective support should increase competence, independence, natural workplace relationships, and sustainable participation.

Role of Family and Employers

Family involvement can contribute to vocational development through encouragement, transportation support, career decision-making, reinforcement of

work habits, and coordination with professionals. Nevala et al. (2019) identified family support as an important facilitator of employment. Employers also play a central role. A supportive employer can provide clear instructions, reasonable workplace accommodations, opportunities to learn new tasks, constructive feedback, and positive relationships with co-workers. Consequently, employment should not be conceptualized solely as an individual's responsibility. Workplace inclusion is a shared responsibility involving the worker, family, educators, vocational professionals, employers, co-workers, and wider social systems.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature demonstrates that vocational work behaviour and employability skills are multidimensional determinants of workplace readiness and employment outcomes among persons with intellectual disability (ID). Successful employment cannot be explained solely by technical or occupation-specific competencies. Rather, it depends on the interaction of individual abilities, workplace behaviour, employer expectations, social relationships, job coaching, family support, and environmental conditions. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) emphasized that employability is influenced by individual, personal, and labour-market factors.

Research highlights the importance of everyday workplace behaviours. Agran et al. (2016) found that punctuality, seeking clarification, following urgent instructions, requesting assistance, responding appropriately to feedback, and interacting with customers were highly valued employment-related social skills. However, these skills were not always adequately taught. This indicates a need for vocational curricula to move beyond technical training and explicitly teach transferable workplace behaviours. The evidence also supports individualized and experiential instruction. Gilson, Carter, and Biggs (2017), in their systematic review of 56 studies involving

766 participants, identified diverse methods for teaching employment skills, including technology-based instruction, self-management, video modelling, visual supports, direct instruction, augmentative and alternative communication, simulation, and peer instruction. These findings suggest that vocational instruction should be adapted to the learner's communication abilities, learning characteristics, occupational requirements, and workplace context. The importance of authentic work experience is further supported by Nevala et al. (2019). Their systematic review indicated that supported employment, work experience, personal support services, job coaching, family involvement, and supportive workplaces can facilitate employment. Conversely, limited work experience, discrimination, classroom-oriented training, and sheltered employment may restrict transition to competitive employment. Thus, workplace readiness should be developed through opportunities for real-world practice rather than relying exclusively on classroom or workshop-based training.

Workplace factors are equally important. Ellenkamp et al. (2016) demonstrated that employer attitudes, job content, workplace interaction and culture, and job-coach support influence competitive employment. This supports an ecological understanding of employment in which responsibility for successful inclusion is shared between the individual and the workplace. Similarly, Carlson et al. (2020) found evidence concerning workplace supports for employees with intellectual disability, while noting limited research addressing career advancement. This suggests that vocational programmes should not focus exclusively on obtaining a first job or preventing job loss. Opportunities for skill development, increased responsibility, promotion, occupational mobility, and long-term career development also require attention. These findings support early and systematic transition planning rather than waiting until the completion of schooling.

Overall, the evidence indicates that vocational work behaviour, employability skills, and employment outcomes are interconnected but are not determined by individual characteristics alone. Effective vocational programmes should combine technical skills with communication, social competence, self-management, problem-solving, adaptability, self-advocacy, workplace safety, and work persistence. In addition, employers, families, educators, vocational trainers, job coaches, and rehabilitation professionals should collaborate to create supportive employment environments. Such an integrated approach can strengthen workplace readiness, job performance, employment retention, independence, and meaningful participation of persons with intellectual disability in community employment.

CONCLUSION

Vocational work behaviour and employability skills represent essential components of workplace readiness and successful employment among persons with intellectual disability. The reviewed literature demonstrates that successful employment requires much more than technical occupational competence. Punctuality, attendance, following instructions, communication, teamwork, work persistence, adaptability, self-management, problem-solving, safety awareness, and appropriate social behaviour are critical to workplace participation. Research by Agran et al. (2016) demonstrates the importance of employment-related social skills, while Gilson et al. (2017) shows that employment competencies can be systematically taught through individualized instructional approaches. Nevala et al. (2019) provides evidence supporting work experience, supported employment, job coaching, family involvement, workplace accommodations, and employer support. Carlson et al. (2020) further highlights the importance of workplace supports for maintaining employment and identifies

career advancement as an important area requiring further research.

Overall, vocational preparation for persons with intellectual disability should move from a narrow focus on occupational task training toward an integrated employment-readiness model. Such a model should combine technical vocational competencies with transferable employability skills, social competence, self-determination, authentic work experience, job coaching, family participation, employer engagement, workplace accommodations, and post-placement support. Employment should ultimately be understood not simply as obtaining a job but as achieving meaningful, sustainable, and socially inclusive participation in the workforce. Systematic development of vocational work behaviour and employability skills can contribute to improved workplace readiness, job performance, employment retention, independence, and quality of life for persons with intellectual disability.

Declaration by Authors

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