

# Employment Empowerment: A Foundational Intervention for Youth with Disabilities to Build Competitive Employment Skills

**April 30, 2021**

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*The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy funded the SSI Youth Solutions Initiative. The project sought potential solutions to improve employment outcomes for young adults ages 14 to 24 who apply for or receive Supplemental Security Income. This report is one of 12 developed for this project.*

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## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Office of Disability Employment Policy by Mathematica, under contract number 1605DC-18-A0020. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government

The author thanks the University of California Berkeley students with disabilities who helped develop and improve this course of instruction which is designed to generate and enhance their “employment empowerment” beliefs. The author also thanks Peggy Klaus, private sector executive coach and author of *Bragging—The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn without Blowing It* and *The Hard Truth About Soft Skills*, who generously contributed her mainstream competitive employment techniques; Thomas Foley, Managing Director, World Institute on Disability, for his instructional content on financial literacy and SSI benefits to employment transitions; the employer members of the Silicon Valley Business Leadership Network (SVBLN) for their good counsel on what employers really want in their competitive workers (SVBLN is a local affiliate of Disability:IN); Barbara Butz, Steve Allen, Eric Glunt, Rayna Alward, and Jeanne Argoff of Disability PolicyWorks for inviting the University of California at Berkeley employment empowerment course described in this paper, to join them in a Kessler Foundation grant proposal to test it more broadly; Caren Sax of the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University for her operational management of the grant; Victor Pineda, the grant’s evaluator; and Elaine Katz of the Kessler Foundation for their support of the grant mentioned in this paper. In addition, the author appreciates the comments and support of staff from Office of Disability Employment Policy and its federal partners, Mathematica project staff, and two anonymous peer reviewers who reviewed earlier drafts.

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## Abstract

Despite many years of good work around benefits counseling, work incentives, employment supports, employer education efforts, and nondiscrimination laws, the employment rate among youth with disabilities remains low. A vital missing piece of our disability employment policy is a focus on “employment empowerment.” Employment empowerment instruction gives individuals with disabilities the attitudes and knowledge needed to address their basic fears and enter the competitive labor market. Competitive employment success requires self-confident job seekers who can impress potential employers with their ambition and ability to get the job done. However, the disability experience often dampens the development of these traits. This proposal suggests adopting a more aggressive employment empowerment approach throughout the disability employment policy arena; calls for federal cross-agency working groups to promote employment empowerment; and offers piloted sample materials whose content helps build the employment self-confidence, ambition, focus, and workplace knowledge necessary for youth with disabilities to embrace and pursue their competitive employment potential. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. This proposal is dedicated to building the will by showing the way.

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## I. Introduction

Too often, the disability identity is characterized by negative thoughts, attitudes, definitions, and expectations about employment. Being young and having a disability makes preparing for employment even more frightening. In the face of these challenges, many youth accept their fate and give up thoughts of pursuing jobs or careers. Despite decades of work toward advancing the employment of people with disabilities through benefits counseling, work incentives, employment preparation programs, employer education efforts, accommodation supports, and employment nondiscrimination laws, the employment rate of youth with disabilities remains stuck at a low level. In 2018, the employment rate of people with disabilities ages 18 to 24 was 39 percent compared with 63 percent among those without disabilities of the same age—almost identical to the rates in the 1980 decennial census rates of 41 percent and 64 percent, respectively (author’s labor force participation and unemployment rate calculations based on Ruggles and others 2020).

These data reflect two facts that have gone unchanged in the past four decades. First, percentage-wise, fewer youth with disabilities participate in the labor force than in 1980. Second, even when they do look for work, they are more likely to remain unemployed. These patterns—and similar disparities throughout the population of working-age people with disabilities—have been apparent in many studies over the past decades. The current proposal’s premise is that this reality is not likely to improve until we focus more directly on this disconnect and give both youth with disabilities and their supporters a chance to become better informed about the barriers they face, more thoughtful about their employment potential, and more aware of a path forward.

This proposal prompts educators, service providers, and relevant federal agencies to consider the need for and merits of adding an aggressive employment empowerment instruction component to what they do when serving youth with disabilities and their supporters in preparing for competitive employment. Employment empowerment instruction can help youth with disabilities reject negative attitudes and see themselves more clearly in the world of work. The rationale underlying this proposal is that positive employment outcomes begin with positive beliefs and attitudes supporting its achievement. If we confront students’ fears and challenges with information, improved employment outcomes will result. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. This proposal’s goal is to build the will by showing the way and changing the conversation from “they tell me I can’t work” to “here’s how I can work.”

This proposal contains three components. The first suggests a broad-based effort for Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) to encourage the widespread implementation of employment empowerment programming. This could target local, state, and federal partners, including Social Security, along with organizations focused on education, workforce, rehabilitation, independent living, or disability in a position to deliver employment empowerment instruction to both youth with disabilities and their supporters. The second component recommends ODEP and its federal allies launch a joint research and demonstration effort designed to study employment empowerment efforts and develop and pursue a coordinated plan for a national employment empowerment policy effort. Lastly, through demonstration support, ODEP can help all related agencies and organizations establish and improve their employment empowerment educational

efforts with incentives and example curriculum materials. To begin such a technical assistance effort, this proposal's third component offers piloted instructional materials available as both an example and free content for this type of program development. The prototype employment empowerment instructional materials described in this proposal have demonstrated the potential for such instruction to develop participants' self-confidence, ambition, and basic workplace readiness in a more empowering way. These initial materials can be improved and adapted for various populations and program settings. Although many existing job skills curricula cover some of these topics, few if any are as fundamental and complete as this proposal's example instructional materials.

This proposal's curriculum consists of two parts. Part I exposes the myths and negativity that trigger self-doubts about one's employment potential. It challenges these barriers with a new disability perspective, offers techniques on how to effectively present a disability in the world of work, and reveals the realities and economic consequences of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits versus work. Part II reviews the basic or core skills needed to be successful in competitive employment. Knowing these universal and fundamental workplace skills further builds the individual's self-confidence around his or her work potential.

Under a two-year Kessler Foundation grant, the curriculum was field tested and evaluated for postsecondary-age youth with disabilities. The students who received this instruction showed improved attitudes toward their employment potential and demonstrated higher employment and training engagement than did other college students with disabilities. The pilots also demonstrated that the curriculum can be easily taught by individuals with a positive disability perspective and prior competitive work experience and it did not require any special instructor training or credentials.

## II. What is employment empowerment?

### A. Goals

This proposal aims to help expand current disability employment policy with a stronger employment empowerment focus. The goal of this cultural shift is to change the way youth with disabilities—and the people who work with and support them—think about their capacity for competitive employment. Increasing their self-confidence and employment skills would lead to behavioral changes, ultimately increasing employment and earnings while reducing public benefit receipt.

This employment empowerment strategy is designed to be a natural extension of the disability (rights) empowerment movement. Fittingly, this proposal's prototype intervention is based on a pioneering effort begun at the University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley)—the birthplace of the original disability empowerment movement. Employment empowerment focuses on three key goals around employment readiness: (1) employment self-confidence, (2) basic workplace rules, and (3) career sustaining skills.

**Employment self-confidence.** A job applicant's self-confidence must show itself in the job application, on a resume, in an interview, and every day at work. This is how employers build their confidence that they have found the right person to employ. For job seekers with disabilities, however, employment self-confidence may be more difficult to build and show, or it may be harder



for potential employers to recognize. The lessons in the employment empowerment instruction are designed to help youth with disabilities build their self-confidence by challenging their fears and negative feelings about being worthy of employment, as well as teaching them the skills needed to project their self-confidence to employers and others in a professional or workplace-acceptable way. By learning and practicing these skills, job seekers with disabilities will increase their employment self-confidence; in turn, they will more likely inspire an employer's confidence in them.

**Basic workplace rules.** The employment empowerment curriculum contains information and tips to help a person with a disability develop his or her fundamental professional (competitive) workplace skills. These skills are the soft, medium, and hard skills that employers want in their workers. Employers don't just want someone who can do the job (hard skills); they also want people who can do the job with the right techniques (medium skills) and with the right style and fit (soft skills). To be successful in finding, holding, and advancing in a job and career, people with or without disabilities need to learn these skills.

**Career sustaining skills.** The foundational workplace skills addressed in the employment empowerment curriculum go beyond the basic skills for beginners to include long-term insights and strategies practiced by all successful workers. These macro skills can help job seekers with disabilities find, win, advance in, and hold on to good jobs in any economy.

With an employment empowerment foundation, people with disabilities can learn not only how to compete effectively for jobs and promotions but also how to outcompete their competition, especially right out of school and against other first-time job seekers.

Although this proposal's curriculum materials were developed with students at postsecondary institutions in mind, the competitive employment instructional objectives remain valid for all types and levels of youth with disabilities. Thus, the curriculum offered in this proposal can benefit from adjustments and accommodations for various learning styles and needs. However, given the realities of competitive employment, the instructional objectives should remain the same across audiences.

## B. Rationale for the intervention

Ample research has shown the close connection among people with disabilities between employment outcomes and employment empowerment concepts such as motivation, persistence, and self-efficacy (Rose and others 2005; Lindsay and others 2019; Regenold, Sherman, and Fenzel 1999; Lindstrom, Doren, and Miesch 2011; Fry and others 2020). The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) list of promising or research-based predictors of postsecondary employment includes topics targeted in employment empowerment, such as career awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy, social skills, and autonomy (NTACT 2019).

Evidence of low expectations and aspirations is evident in the data from the National Transitional Longitudinal Survey (NTLS) 2012. High school students enrolled in special education were significantly more likely than other students to say they expected to end their education after high school, two-year college, or vocational school and less likely to say they expected to attend a four-year college. They were significantly less likely to participate in any work activities, especially those

obtained competitively. Parents of special education students were significantly less likely to say they expected their children to live independently as adults (Lipscomb and others 2017). Similarly, low expectations of adult independence were observed among youth with disabilities and their parents in an earlier wave of the NTLs, with interviews conducted in 2003. In that year, 95 percent of 15- to 19-year-olds with disabilities reported expecting they would definitely hold a paid job as an adult (Wagner and others 2007), the expectations of those youth did not pan out—by 2005, individuals with disabilities ages 17 to 21 (the same cohort interviewed in the 2000 NTLs sample) were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those without disabilities—when they were participating in the labor force at all (author’s calculation based on Ruggles and others 2020).

In addition to low aspirations, youth may be hesitant to enter the work world out of a fear of losing access to benefits. In interviews conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) with staff from vocational rehabilitation agencies and the Social Security Administration (SSA), respondents cited this factor as a barrier to employment for youth receiving SSI benefits, along with lack of knowledge about work incentives offered through the SSI program (GAO 2017).

The author of this proposal observed the effects of these attitudes firsthand. As a Disability Employment Advisor with the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy in the mid-2000s and in earlier federal employment, he interviewed more than 600 college students with disabilities from all across the country for internship and job opportunities through the federally supported Workforce Recruitment Program. These interviews revealed a general lack of self-confidence and workplace acumen among most of these job applicants. In short, the college students with disabilities weren’t up to competitive employment standards. Later, as the director of the Disabled Students Program at UC Berkeley, working among talented and promising students with disabilities, he continued to observe this fundamental lack of competitive employment self-confidence, preparation, and planning. In response, he began developing the curriculum described in this proposal and offering it as a course at Berkeley. Survey data from this course and successor courses offered through a Kessler grant at two other universities demonstrate the low self-confidence and career aspirations for students entering this course—despite their successful enrollment at competitive four-year universities.

The curriculum described in this proposal’s third component addresses these challenges head on and sequentially builds a student’s knowledge, skills, and confidence. Students enrolled in this type of curriculum are expected to be at a low level of understanding—not just of the process but also of the unstated purposes and expectations of employers and coworkers. For example, the curriculum not only explains the job interview as a process but also exposes the underlying fundamentals of its purpose. (See Appendix B for an example of this curriculum’s content.) In this way, a more fundamental and complete understanding further builds the student’s self-confidence and skill. Although there are numerous existing transition and other employment preparation programs/services across the country, they typically only offer pieces of the content covered in the curriculum under titles like self-advocacy, job exploration, education and training options, work readiness, and work-based learning experiences. In an extensive search for existing resources to use in this proposal’s curriculum, the author found no other curricula that were specifically designed, as

this one is, to initiate the disability employment empowerment process in such a fundamental, compelling, and complete way.

The need for services that encompass employment empowerment has been recognized previously. Although it does not provide a curriculum, the Office of Disability Employment Policy (Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth 2019) published its *Guideposts for Success* recommendations on important programming content needed to stimulate the competitive employment ambitions and skills of youth with disabilities. This proposal closely aligns with *Guideposts* principles and has translated them into a curriculum. Key examples from the *Guideposts* included in this proposal's sample employment empowerment curriculum are the following:

- Career assessment and exploration strategies
- (The value of) work-based learning and service experiences
- (How to get) career and technical education and other career-related applied learning
- Training in social skills, self-regulation, and other employability skills
- Access to accommodations and supports in career pathway programs
- Accessible technology in employment training settings and the workplace
- Training on rights to disability-related accommodations
- Training on disability disclosure decision making
- Training on how to approach employers about accommodation requests
- Assistance finding and performing work in competitive, integrated employment settings
- (The need for) formal and informal mentoring experiences with adults and peers
- Opportunities to develop agency, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills
- Formal and informal experiences that develop initiative and leadership skills
- Opportunities to build interpersonal skills
- Opportunities to build social capital and connections to peers and role models
- Opportunities to develop critical thinking skills
- Accessible programs and environments to engage in youth development and leadership
- Training on disability-related rights and responsibilities, policies, history, and culture

### C. The employment empowerment curriculum

The employment empowerment content is based on nine years of research, implementation, and adjustment. It was first developed as a course offering for students with disabilities at the University of California at Berkeley and expanded for use at two other universities with the help of the Interwork Institute at San Diego State University under a grant from the Kessler Foundation. The curriculum consists of two parts.

Part I is intended to dispel the myths and negativity that trigger self-doubt about one's employment potential. It offers a frank discussion of why people with disabilities may have negative thoughts about their employment potential. With these myths and fears exposed, this part of the content offers a new perspective around disability identity that is more in line with present-day realities and workplace requirements. It helps participants make an emotional and philosophical transition from negativity to a more positive and contemporary point of view. Part I also offers techniques on how to effectively present a disability in the world of work. It reviews history, laws, politics, finance, and Social Security realities to help develop students' thinking about what might be best for them.

Part II includes eight key subject areas that explore and build the students' workplace understandings and skills around what it takes to be successful in competitive employment. The discussions begin by explaining why each skill set is needed. Offering this fundamental understanding helps to make up for the lack of any prior work experiences (which are often missing with the target population). Learning these skills, in this way, further builds self-confidence around work potential. In fact, knowing these professional skills in such a fundamental way can give the students an edge over their competition.

The curriculum is available in three different packages that offer flexibility for use by both individuals and groups (Hippolitus 2020, n.d.; Interwork Institute 2014):

- *Make It Work*, a 250-page self-help guide or course reader
- A six-part workshop series for secondary and postsecondary-age youth based on the material in *Make It Work*
- *Bridging the Gap from College to Careers*, a 34- to 40-hour course curriculum consisting of 17 individual lessons supported by videos and lecture notes for instructors

Appendices A and B provide additional detail, with a table of contents for *Make It Work* and selected excerpts adapted from the curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

*Make It Work* and *Bridging the Gap* are only one possible set of tools for delivering employment empowerment instruction. A broad policy shift toward employment empowerment would doubtless see many other approaches developed to convey these attitudes and behaviors. Groups interested in using these materials may also adapt them to integrate into different settings or tailor them to specific service groups. The materials are offered in this proposal as a piloted, freely available, off-the-shelf employment empowerment curriculum.

The educational content in this proposal's prototype curriculum is not complicated to teach. An important lesson to emerge from the pilot testing undertaken with Kessler grant support is that many experienced workers can teach this content when they possess (1) a sensitivity around disability issues and empowerment principles, (2) prior competitive workplace experience, and (3) the ability to adjust the content to meet the learning styles of the students being served. Moreover, successful employment empowerment teachers will have the kinds of qualities that an employment empowerment orientation

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<sup>1</sup> The complete instructional content is available at [www.employempower.net](http://www.employempower.net).

seeks to impart and that are covered in the curriculum. These include values like self-advocacy and self-determination, an understanding of how to represent and manage a disability in the workplace, professionalism in their own work life, and positive expectations for their students. Instructors who themselves lack those attitudes or characteristics—or who cannot effectively communicate with and coach students with disabilities—will be less successful at imparting them to others.

Although this employment empowerment program began in postsecondary education, it has shown its value more broadly. This curriculum can help both youth with disabilities as well as their supporters—family members; teachers, counselors, workforce professionals, and independent living center staff; advisors, coaches, counselors, mentors, and peer mentors; and even employers—shift their point of view toward employment empowerment.

#### D. Evidence of effectiveness

The prototype employment empowerment content was developed as a class for students at UC Berkeley. Sponsored by a two-year Kessler grant, it underwent further development and was demonstrated at three public, four-year universities in California—including San Diego State University and California State University at Fullerton, in addition to UC Berkeley. The Interwork Institute at San Diego State University managed the grant project. During the 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 school years, 154 undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities from across the three campuses were recruited to participate in the semester-long *Bridging the Gap* course. In addition, students received placement assistance and peer mentoring, although these resources were not a necessary part of the intervention and comparable services are sometimes available depending on the setting (Kessler Foundation 2018).

The project team used three methods to measure the impact of the curriculum. The first technique measured learning gains in key subject areas. Students completed pre- and post-instruction tests to measure changes in basic skills or beliefs. The before and after learning scores shown in Table 1 document tremendous improvements in these students’ fundamental beliefs associated with competitive employment. These learning gains were measured before any related mentoring or internship experiences.

**Table 1. Kessler grant participant responses from pre- and post-program assessments**

Key skill (answered yes)	Before course (%)	After course (%)
Believed disability is an asset to employers	31.6	90.9
Felt unprepared for work	51.6	10.7
Were able to answer “what work do you hope for?”	46.8	92.3
Knew workplace values	34.6	76.3
Felt comfortable in job interviews	19.9	86.0
Felt comfortable working with people	38.5	87.1
Felt comfortable speaking about accomplishments	24.2	87.1
Felt comfortable sharing their thoughts freely	34.4	88.6
Understood what employers are looking for	32.5	93.8
Believed it would be hard to get job with disability	67.5	19.1

Key skill (answered yes)	Before course (%)	After course (%)
Able to demonstrate their leadership skills	44.2	84.6
Felt comfortable discussing accommodation needs	26.6	85.1
Deal with employers' fears about hiring people with disabilities	28.2	94.6
Knew disability laws	26.3	93.9
Believed employers will want to hire them	29.1	93.1
Believed disability is a source of pride	65.5	91.6

Source: Pineda (2016).

The key skills listed in Table 1 can also be used for determining an individual student's need for, or potential benefit from, employment empowerment instruction. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix E of the course book *Make It Work*.

**Box 1. Student comments on the employment empowerment course**

- “What a great idea to actually help students with disabilities prepare more deeply and completely for their careers.”
- “The information was fundamentally important and represents a missing link in our transition process.”
- “This course taught me a lot of disability resources that I didn’t know or would have never found looking around on my own.”
- “Other than this course, there isn’t a lot out there to guide us.”
- “This course fills a void of information and direction on the subject.”
- “How to manage your disability in an interview was a new idea and very helpful to me.”

The second technique was to longitudinally follow the students’ progress and employment-related outcomes after the course. Of the 61 students who had graduated by the end of the 2016 school year when the grant period ended, 7 planned to enroll in graduate school and 36—two-thirds of the remaining 54—had secured employment at an average annual salary of \$52,000 (Interwork Institute 2016).

The third technique was to gather open-ended feedback from the students on the usefulness and impact of the content offered. Some sample comments are shown in the call-out box; more can be reviewed in the free online course book (Hippolitus 2020, 6–8).

Instructors in the Kessler grant pilot demonstrations anecdotally described a significant level of student apathy around or aversion to enrolling in these classes. It took instructors a great deal of effort to fill their classrooms. After some investigating, it became clear that students’ reluctance or aversion was based on their deep fears and doubts about their competitive employment potential. Thus, their instincts were to avoid the subject and course. Once students began the first session, instructors reported, their engagement level, apparent attitude, and even posture changed noticeably for the better in short order.

Another important, though anecdotal, finding came from follow-up interviews with these instructors. They reported that the content of this course was not difficult to teach. The general qualifications that the instructors needed were

- A positive disability perspective
- Prior competitive work experiences in line with the curriculum's content
- The ability to adjust the content to meet the learning styles of the students being served

With these general skills, instructors found the content easy to understand and convey.

Subsequent to the Kessler grant activities described above, the Kessler Foundation supported a follow-up use of the curriculum in Florida, through Florida Atlantic University, Broward College, Beacon College, and “Autism After 21” (a community secondary program). The employment empowerment curriculum offered in this SSI Youth proposal was delivered to 164 students with disabilities, along with employment and peer mentoring support. Although most of the students receiving this instruction remained in school after the two-year grant ended, 38 of those ready for employment were employed in the Central Florida area at an average rate of \$13.67 per hour. In addition, the Florida Department of Education approved this course's content as a 100 or 400 level course.

### III. Implementing an employment empowerment program

This proposal calls for a cultural shift to permeate the disability employment field, focused on changing the attitudes and knowledge of youth with disabilities and their supporters and service providers. To effect this change would require both a change in the instruction delivered to youth with disabilities and a broader effort at the institutional and system level. **The broad policy proposed here is for those operating or supporting disability employment related programs to pursue and strengthen these programs by examining the adequacy of their employment empowerment capabilities and efforts and, where needed, further develop and implement more complete employment empowerment instruction.**

This section discusses a two-pronged effort.

#### A. Target population for employment empowerment instruction

The target population for an employment empowerment instruction intervention begins with youth with disabilities who have self-doubts about their employment potential, especially youth receiving SSI, their supporting professionals, and family members. This section describes potential ways to identify the target population and suggests potential outreach methods. A secondary question is how to identify youth who might particularly benefit from employment empowerment—because of the nature of disability, individual youth will face different challenges and opportunities, and need different interventions, depending on the nature of their difficulties. The adaptable nature of the sample curriculum already available means that organizations can tailor the service delivery to their

specific populations or to each individual. Meanwhile, the foundational employment empowerment ideal of breaking down barriers and building self-efficacy will be valuable to everyone.

For promoting the employment empowerment mindset among youth and delivering employment empowerment instruction to them, agencies and organizations could begin with their existing service groups. A starting point with the general population, including potentially eligible youth receiving SSI, might be to focus on youth with disabilities who are still in either secondary or postsecondary schools, either with an individualized education plan (IEP) or secondary transition plan (in secondary school) or through their postsecondary institution's disability support systems.

Another approach on outreach might center on reaching new SSI applicants and current recipients. The Work Incentives Planning and Assistance program funds coordinators in each state and territory to communicate directly with youth receiving SSI and with local organizations serving them to provide benefits counseling and information about services. This program might provide one channel to specifically reach youth receiving SSI with opportunities for employment empowerment instruction. Although this proposal is aimed broadly at all youth with disabilities, youth receiving SSI face additional challenges to participating in competitive employment. SSI payments decline as earnings increase, potentially reducing the incentive to work. Moreover, risk aversion and the fear of permanently losing SSI eligibility and Medicaid might deter some youth receiving SSI from challenging themselves to enter the labor market. Although SSI includes a number of work incentives, beneficiaries' knowledge of these programs is limited (GAO 2017). These types of attitudes and knowledge gaps are explicitly targeted by Part I of the employment empowerment curriculum.

### **B. A federal working group to promote employment empowerment at the institutional and system level**

The section below describes this proposal's second component—a federal cross-agency effort to promote employment empowerment, which could be spearheaded by ODEP or another member agency—along with ideas for how various agencies or organizations could support this effort. In addition to encouraging the use of employment empowerment curricula, this effort would improve attitudes toward employment among youth receiving SSI and other youth with disabilities by providing a narrative in the disability policy space that is supportive of youth's competitive employment potential. One task for this group would be to conduct a series of projects or demonstrations, based on the recommended roles below, by adapting and testing these resources for different populations and settings.

For the broader cultural change envisioned in this proposal, the target audience would include individuals and institutions throughout the disability employment policy field: federal, state, and local government employees, plus administrators and staff of grantee organizations and civic groups. The partners in the federal cross-agency working group could target these audiences through the standard methods of publicizing federal policy initiatives: speeches and public engagements by agency officials, public service campaigns, the writing of grant requirements, conference themes, and presentations. This messaging effort could promote the curriculum described in this proposal, along



with other employment empowerment resources from other developers and researchers, including resources developed in the processes described in Section C below.

Employment empowerment is not intended to be a new program separate and apart from what already exists. Rather it is an attitude reorientation and a set of flexible tools for diverse populations to experience in a variety of settings. Just as supported and customized employment helps to make our existing employment preparation programs better able to adjust to the various needs of youth receiving SSI, employment empowerment can modify existing programs to make them better able to address the doubts and fears about the employment potential of both youth and adults with disabilities. Hence, all disability employment-related programming should be equipped to offer employment empowerment instruction based on the example offered in this proposal.

This group should incorporate representatives from SSA and ODEP, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Education (ED). ODEP would apply its disability employment policy experience and engage workforce system partners in supporting the policy development, demonstrations, and implementation of the employment empowerment initiative. HHS would support its centers for independent living (CILs, sometimes called ILCs) involvement through its leadership, grants, technical assistance, and so on; and ED would oversee efforts related to school-based education and community rehabilitation. Other federal and organizational partners could include the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Council for Exceptional Children, National Rehabilitation Association, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, National Association of Workforce Boards, National Council on Independent Living, and American Association of People with Disabilities.

**Centers for independent living** are a network of more than 400 centers with more than 700 local community offices. These centers increasingly provide employment supports and services and are steeped in a tradition of teaching disability empowerment principles and other independent living skills. Employment empowerment would be a natural augmentation to their current offerings and could provide a setting in which to further test, adapt, and demonstrate the *Make It Work* and *Bridging the Gap* materials.

**Education programs.** Secondary transition programs might consider these materials as a resource as they develop their transition plans and instructional objectives for students with disabilities. Elements from this curriculum could become options for employment transition learning objectives in both IEPs and 504 plans. Offering employment empowerment instructional content to teachers, support staff and parents may help to harmonize expectations, support, and planning. Postsecondary education programs can utilize this content to enrich college and university career centers, job fairs, and other student employment supports, making them better able to serve their students with disabilities.

**Public and private rehabilitation programs.** Vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies and rehabilitation organizations can use this content to help ensure their clients have the prerequisite self-confidence and skills to take full advantage of their programs and supports. This instruction can

also help VR agencies meet their 15 percent federal funding set-aside requirement for pre-employment transition services.

**Workforce system programs.** An employment empowerment approach would help support the workforce system’s disability mission in the areas of “return to work” and “stay at work” programs for workers with newly acquired disabilities. This segment of the population is often entering their newly acquired disability identity with even less confidence and knowledge about their work potential than other people with disabilities.

**National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research** can support research efforts exploring issues such as “employment reluctance” and expanded content options for the various program models suggested in this section.

**Subminimum wage (Section 14c) transition programs** are facing greater expectations and legislative proposals around moving their clients into higher wage competitive jobs. Employment empowerment can offer a significant structural element contributing to the eventual success of this movement.

**Disability, family or parent, and third-party professional organizations** serving youth receiving SSI and other people with disabilities can promulgate employment empowerment principles, content, and resources to those they serve. These groups include Council on Exceptional Children, National Rehabilitation Association, National Centers for Independent Living, National Associations of State Directors of Special Education, Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, and many more.

With these suggested roles and partnerships around employment empowerment in place, we can better coordinate and implement our efforts to achieve greater competitive employment results for youth receiving SSI and more broadly for other individuals with disabilities.

### C. Further research and development

Although the Kessler grant results offer suggestive evidence of the potential of employment empowerment, further research, development, and demonstration are needed, particularly around the following elements:

- Basic research into the causal impact of employment empowerment approaches on youth labor market outcomes over the short and longer term, as compared to either the business-as-usual approach or more traditionally focused vocational preparatory curricula.
- Adapting the curriculum and measuring its impact in various settings (for example, education, rehabilitation, and CILs) and among specific subpopulations (for example, SSI recipients, Section 14c workers)
- Developing additional content and delivery models, including different approaches for various learning styles (based on, for example, disability type, age, or education level)
- Pursuing effective policy strategies to promote, refine, and sustain these efforts

A series of demonstration projects aimed at the learning agenda above would help explore whether employment empowerment models hold promise for other systems and circumstances. Because the content is already available, the research and development costs might be limited to local grant program replications. The suggested grant program's purpose would be to integrate the materials into existing program models in organizations with different target populations to suit their students, clients, or customers and their key supporters. These demonstrations would benefit from a broader federal employment empowerment policy initiative, as proposed above. ODEP's existing technical assistance projects (such as Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth and the National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities) could support the collection of the demonstration grants data and, in turn, refine the content as well as support the associated technical assistance, marketing, and training needed. The federal partners mentioned earlier could help fund the demonstration projects in their spheres of influence and more broadly to make this the starting point to disability employment empowerment efforts throughout the government.

## IV. Conclusion

To overcome gaps in expectations, aspirations, knowledge, and job-seeking skills between youth with disabilities and their peers without disabilities, this proposal offers three solutions, aimed at three different levels of implementation.

At the broadest level, this proposal calls for a greater emphasis in the disability employment policy field toward employment empowerment. This approach focuses on providing accurate information to dispel misunderstanding and apprehension; setting ambitious but achievable expectations tailored to every individual's unique abilities, among youth with disabilities and their supporters; and giving youth practical skills to obtain and retain competitive employment. To ensure this cultural change permeates the entire field, this proposal also recommends a federal cross-agency working group, both to raise awareness of this employment empowerment and to promote it through policy.

Finally, this proposal describes an off-the-shelf, piloted employment empowerment curriculum that addresses the challenges faced by youth with disabilities head on in a sequential, comprehensive way. Although this curriculum was developed for students in a postsecondary setting, it is freely available to be adapted for other groups and settings. This type of adaptation would ideally be a central focus of projects undertaken under the oversight of the federal working group.

Obtaining competitive employment seemed like an insurmountable challenge to many of the youth with disabilities this author worked with at the University of California. Yet these students, and many others like them, have great potential and have supporters who want to help them realize it. As it has often been said, "where there's a will, there's a way." This proposal is dedicated to building the will by showing the way.

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## **Appendix A**

**Table of contents, *Make It Work* course book**

## Part I: The disability factor (how to best position yourself as a job candidate with a disability)

1. The disability experience
2. Creating a new disability experience
3. A new perspective for the workplace
4. Key disability values
5. Discrimination threat and performance
6. The disability message you want to send
7. Accommodation strategies
8. Disclosure strategies
9. A brief disability history
10. Disability employment laws
11. Social security work incentives
12. How to represent the disability community
13. The emotional response: Why choose work
14. Voices of experience: Part I (testimonials about entering competitive employment from youth with disabilities)

## Part II: Professional skills (how to become a competitive job seeker and employee)

1. Workplace presence (soft skills—marketing yourself)
  - Framing yourself
  - Dress and appearance
  - Personality
  - Self-confidence
  - Effective communications
  - How to listen
  - Art of bragging
  - Going over the top (OTT)
2. Workplace practices (medium skills—rules of the road)
  - Being professional at all times
  - Leadership
  - Chain of command
  - Teamwork
  - Loyalty and integrity
  - Professional communications
  - Time management
  - Being dependable
  - Always keep learning
  - Think and act strategically (the big picture)
  - Know how you’re doing (self-assessment and performance ratings)
  - Being innovative
  - Workplace relationships
  - Sharing credit and saying “thank you”
3. Workplace technical skills (hard skills or job-specific skills)
  - Identifying and describing your job-specific skills
  - Knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) method
4. Workplace package (soft, medium, and hard skills combined)
  - The deeper skills wanted
  - How to improve your skills (education and training options)



5. Workplace patterns (understanding individual and group differences in the workplace)
  - Differences between “worlds” (disability, education, and work)
  - Individual differences
  - Multigenerational workforce differences
  - Diversity patterns
  - Gender perspectives
  - Boss and co-worker relationships
  - Employment opportunities
6. Workplace job searching strategies (finding and winning the job)
  - Your virtual look
  - Resumes
  - Other materials (social media, business cards, introduction letters, biographies)
  - The art of the interview (prepare, practice, and throw the resume away)
  - Relationship building
  - Networking
7. Workplace pathways (resources to assist you with your employment)
  - The value of education
  - Transition programs
  - Postsecondary education
  - State department of rehabilitation
  - Other community based employment programs
  - American job centers
  - Self-employment and Small Business Administration
8. Workplace planning (developing and advancing your career plan)
  - The career plan
  - Exploring careers that interest you
  - Researching specific entry level jobs
  - Implementing your plan
  - Career advancement strategies
9. Voices of experience: Part II

## **Appendix B**

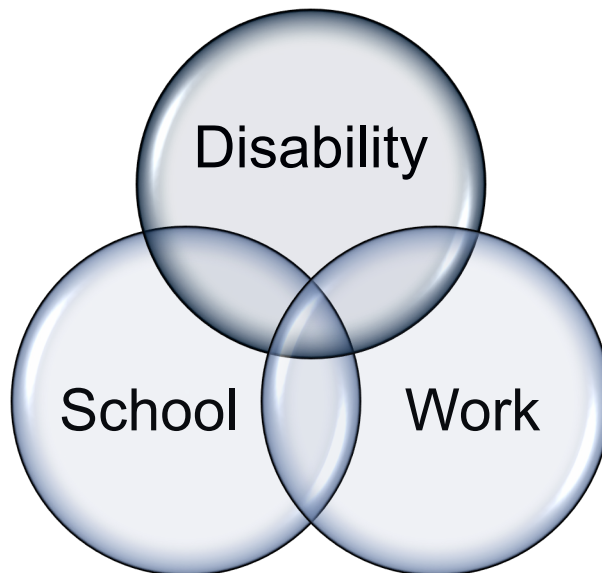
### **Adapted Excerpts from the Employment Empowerment Curriculum**

Below are sample excerpts adapted from the employment empowerment prototype curriculum offered in this proposal.

### A. Part I (excerpts)

In order to be able to compete for a job and a career, successful people learn how to best position themselves and their identities (from their other “worlds”) into the world of work. They need to learn how to bring into the world of work only those skills and practices that fit into this new world. They must achieve a proper focus, balance, and understanding of the relationship among these three worlds [of disability, school, and work] (see Figure B.1). They must learn how to make this transition if they are to become a competitive professional employee.

**Figure B.1. What works in the world of work: Different worlds overlap only partially**



Each of these worlds has its own rules and expectations. Sometimes these realities are at odds with one another, and at other times, they mix quite well. For example, in the world of school or education, there are different social, dress, accountability, rewards, and relationship standards that should not be taken to work. Likewise, some of the disability world’s realities may clash if they fall outside of the shared space that is the world of work. For example, how people assert their rights in the disability world may be different from how they would in the world of work. Also, accommodation strategies, devices, or techniques may need to change when one leaves the world of disability and the world of education for the world of work. If individuals don’t pay attention to these shifts in focus or realities, their successful transition to the world of work may become more difficult. Job seekers need not entirely give up either their school or disability related identities: they just need to know what will work in the world of work and what will not. Here’s how...

**Disability is normal.** When you were growing up with a disability, did your teachers or relatives ask your friends, brothers, or sisters who were not disabled, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” Did they ask you? When you were at school and sports or other class events and activities were

happening, were they open to you? Did you even take a “special” bus to school while others rode the “regular” bus? Or leave class for individual supports and instruction? What’s “normal” about that? The fact is that in many cases, disability takes extra time, effort, and expense. As a result, we are likely to view a disability as a “drag.”

How, then, can “disability be normal”?

Well, in fact, disability is a very common human characteristic or trait. Did you know that at least 15 percent of the world’s population has a disability? Disability is thus not rare. In fact, it’s quite common. It’s so common or prevalent that it should be considered a normal part of the human condition. Become confident and comfortable about this fundamental truth. Not only should you think this way, but you should also act this way—be normal.

It’s normal to

- Pursue your education
- Work
- Travel and take vacations
- Participate in recreation and sports
- Exercise full citizenship—vote and run for office
- Have friends, a partner, and a family

Make your disability a normal thing in your life and others will follow your lead. Here’s how...

**Diversity includes disability.** As you know, employers have widely embraced the idea that having a diverse workforce gives them a better workforce and, in turn, a stronger company. With the awareness and attention currently being paid by employers to the value of diversity, you should consider preparing yourself to represent the idea that you bring added value to an organization’s diversity efforts. Having workers with disabilities in their organization can help companies expand their diversity capability. If you have a disability, it may be an advantage to your candidacy for a job—either as a person with a disability or, if you are qualified to do this, represent your demographic in the organization. Here’s how...

**Having a disability is an asset.** As we discussed earlier, disability is often viewed by an employer as a limitation, inability, or liability. Have you ever thought about the fact that managing a disability has likely given you skills and experiences that may make you a better person? And perhaps a better job candidate? Or that the experience of handling a disability develops skills that might be useful in the workplace and you might be able to brag about these skills when presenting yourself for a job? If you think about it, many disability-related experiences and tactics can be translated into workplace skills.

These skills might be

- Time management
- Setting priorities
- Program or project management
- Supervising
- Payroll and bookkeeping
- Educating and persuading people
- Determination and hard work values

A disability can challenge you to plan more carefully, to develop other strengths and capabilities more completely, to problem-solve in more complex ways, and, to help others better accept and understand disability by educating them about it. Here's how...

**Accommodations or adjustments.** To many employers, the subject of an accommodation for a worker with a disability sounds rather special and different from what they expect, as well as requiring extra effort and expense. The reality is that most accommodations are relatively easy to provide and lead to better job performance by the employee. For example, voice dictation software usually costs under \$200—a relatively small expense for most organizations. The fact is just about every worker, disabled or not, will likely ask for some sort of job accommodation, but nondisabled job accommodations are often granted by a supervisor without any of the negative feelings that might surround a disability-related accommodation. Why is there a difference between nondisabled and disabled workplace accommodations? Well, it's time to move disability accommodations into the mainstream of routine workplace adjustments. Think about it. What are disability accommodations anyway? They're ways to make a worker more productive. Let's start describing the subject of disability accommodations in positive terms like calling them individual "productivity improvements" or enhancements. Nothing warms the heart of a boss more than an employee who says, "I think I can improve my productivity and performance if I could use this device, technique, or workplace adjustment." Disability accommodations are best described as methods for improving a person's productivity. Let's start thinking about disability accommodations as common, routine, everyday workplace adjustments designed to make you even more productive. Here's how...

**Familiarity overcomes fear.** As we've discussed, disability often generates a mild form of fear or apprehension in our nondisabled friends. When a disability enters the room, the nondisabled person may "pull back" and look for ways to get away from the person with a disability (like not hire you). It's important for you to understand, recognize, and develop the skills needed to counter or push back their fears. When encountering these situations, lead with your human warmth, personality, and good will. Help them to get to know you and not your disability. Help them to get to that place where you're just two well-intentioned people talking with each other. Here's how...

**Self-advocacy in the workplace.** As a person with a disability, you face barriers and discrimination all the time. No doubt, you've been encouraged and taught how to self-advocate for yourself. And,

most likely, you've had to self-advocate numerous times in a variety of situations or settings, and sometimes in an assertive or confrontational manner. Our goal or strategy for the workplace is still to self-advocate in the face of disability discrimination. However, our tactics are adjusted or fashioned to better fit into this environment.

In this way, your self-advocacy skills are working for you and you will have demonstrated them in a way that preserves and improves your workplace performance. Here's how...

**Dignity of risk.** Given the history of society's attitudes and perceptions around disability, it's not surprising when we hear this caution, "We must keep people with disabilities safe from harm or injury." This can be a problem when employers or program operators say, "I can't let people with disabilities in because they might hurt themselves." Sure, they're thinking about safety. And thoughts about safety are anchored in the principle that it should always be the first consideration. "Safety First" signs may be posted on the wall or just flashing on and off in the person's head. Without having a right to take some reasonable risks, we may lose the opportunity to succeed and enjoy life. Let's be both safe and reasonably. Here's how...

**With rights come responsibilities.** The "godfather" of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Justin Dart, Jr., during the campaign to get the law passed, always paired the word "rights" with the word "responsibilities." What did he mean when he put these two words together? What he was telling us was "yes" we must have legal rights for people with disabilities; however, people with disabilities hold an equal responsibility to pursue those rights correctly. For these civil rights to work effectively, people with disabilities need to live up to their end of the bargain. They have a responsibility to consider working and, when able, to prepare themselves for competitive employment. In addition, when you win a job, you have a responsibility to perform as expected. Here's how...

**Key disability values.** Define yourself. As we know, there are many different disability categories. Plus, there are dozens of definitions for the word "disability." Most, if not all, of these disability names and definitions approach the subject from the perspective of what a person can't do rather than from the perspectives of what he or she can do—and/or may do in a different way. But what if you were in a wheelchair and there were no stairs in your way, just ramps, wide entrances, and elevators everywhere? What happens to the definition of disability then? Are you still "mobility limited" in such an environment? What if you are a neurodiverse person (on the autism spectrum) and you tend to concentrate on one aspect of your environment while missing the social cues of the people around you? Is that a disability that should be viewed as a "disability" or is it just a different way of sensing your environment? Why can't it be just described as an enhanced ability to concentrate and observe things more completely than others might? What about people with dyslexia who either can't or have great difficulty reading the printed word? When their books are in electronic format or audio they can usually read and learn as well as everyone else. Plus, as a result of dyslexia, they might even be better able to observe patterns more readily and "see" or imagine things in the abstract better than those who can easily read the printed word. The point is that people with disabilities are individuals with different styles, techniques, and capabilities. They shouldn't be confined to the definitions society has traditionally imposed upon them. In addition, the disability way of doing things can even represent a strength or quality like those suggested in the examples

above. Unfortunately, current disability definitions hamper society's ability to understand these deeper meanings.

Thus, it's important for both people with disabilities and society to begin to understand disability in a more complete way—beyond traditional disability terms and definitions. Accepting disability-related differences and styles as normal variations of the human condition and even, sometimes, as strengths is where we must go next.

This is our truth. Become positive about your disability, not negative as traditional definitions suggest. The employment point of this is that our ways of doing things differently brings added strengths and capabilities to situations (including a job).

Learn how to become an effective communicator about your disability-related differences and strengths. To help educate those who need to know the deeper truth about your disability, talk about your disability accurately, carefully, and at the right time in these more positive ways. Here's how...

**Self-determination.** The term “self-determination” means you (not others) make the decisions about your life. Have you ever noticed the fact that people with disabilities with similar abilities often end up achieving very different employment outcomes? Let's imagine that there are two people who have the exact same disability. They share similar backgrounds and experiences and even attended the same schools while earning the same grades. Yet they achieved very different career results. One has a successful career and the other doesn't work at all.

What made the difference?

Of course, there may be many reasons for their different outcomes; however, success most often happens when someone embraces self-determination's meaning, which says, “You can control your own success or destiny.” In our example, the successful person was motivated by this value and chose to think about successfully working every day. She used this principle to keep on going, growing, and working hard to make it happen. Here's how...

### B. Part II (excerpts)

As we begin, let's define what it means to be a good working professional in competitive employment. Most people think it just means getting paid for doing work. But it means much more. Here's a beginning definition of being a good “professional” worker:

- It means being *appropriate* and *mature* in the workplace.
- It means being a *serious and engaged* worker at all times.
- It means paying attention to your *responsibilities*.
- It means doing your job *on time*, doing it *well*, and in the *right way*.
- It means demonstrating a *commitment* to your organization and its mission.

- It means not letting your *emotions* override your sense of what should be done in a *business-like manner*.
- It means being *polite, proper, respectful, and nice* to all you meet.
- It means being *likeable*.
- It means being *clear and specific* in your communications.
- It means never losing your *temper*, even when the circumstances may seem unbearable.
- It means keeping a *good attitude* and *positive outlook*.
- It means being and staying *properly dressed and presentable* all day long.
- It means *sharing* information and credit with others, even when you might not want to.
- It means being *loyal and having integrity*.

Being professional also means that you have all the basic skills necessary to be both “efficient” and “effective” in a job. Being efficient means that you know how to get things done with little wasted motion, time, or effort. Being effective means that you know how to successfully complete your work tasks in a logical, organized, pleasant, and timely manner.

With this basic definition of being professional in mind, the rest of this book will further explain and explore these core professional skills in more detail...

**Workplace skills and a disability.** When you face a professional skill that you think you can’t do because of a disability, the first strategy is take a deep breath (calm yourself) and consider the merits of trying to get as close as possible to the workplace expectation or practice that is being described. For example, when talking about “workplace presence,” you will be encouraged to gesture or move your hands and arms in unison with your speaking voice. If you can’t move your hands or arms because of a disability, you may worry, “Is all lost with regard to this skill?” No, it isn’t—unless you give up right away. In other words, when you feel you cannot do the professional skill being described, don’t give up right away. Instead, try this three-step accommodation strategy.

1. Try the skill or practice being described. Who knows, with practice you may be able to accomplish the skill or get closer to it than you thought possible. If after reasonable attempts or practice, it’s just not possible, that’s okay—now you know that you’ve tried and are ready to move on to the next two steps.
2. The next step is to consider either an accommodation or alternative technique to demonstrate the skill being described. Use your imagination. Ask others you trust for ideas on possible adapted techniques or technologies that may help you to achieve the workplace skill being discussed. For example, if you’re trying to improve your gesturing skills (moving your arms and hands as you talk) and your disability makes it impossible, consider the possibility of moving your electric wheelchair, or even just your eyes or facial expressions, in ways that mimic the idea of gesturing.
3. If neither Step 1 nor Step 2 work, the third step (or strategy) to consider is an artful way of letting others know that although you value the skill, due to your disability, you can’t perform it.



This strategy does two important things. First, it tells the other person that you know about the skill (that shows them your commitment to being professional); second, it clearly explains to the other person why you don't practice that skill. This makes the situation understandable, expected and normal.

**The art of the job interview.** Most often, this subject focuses on how to perform during the interview. Although this lesson also covers these points, it begins with a revelation about the fundamentals of the job interview, especially when a disability enters the interview room. The thought bubbles below (Figure B.2) illustrate what is really going on in the interviewer's mind when asking his or her questions. Sure, you try and answer the spoken or "out loud" questions. However, at the same time, you should try to also answer the unasked or unspoken questions that are floating around in interviewer's mind about you and your disability. Here the questions you may never get asked and here's how you should still answer them...

**Figure B.2. Unasked questions that employers want answered during a job interview**





**4. KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES (KSAS)**

- What are your job-specific related Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities?



**5. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- Did you answer the questions I asked?
- Were your answers good?



**6. DISABILITY**

- How can you do this job with your disability?
- Disability accommodations are expensive, aren't they?
- If I hire you, what will my boss, fellow workers, or customers say about my hiring decision?
- I have other job candidates without disabilities; why don't I just get to the next applicant?