

VCU-RRTC on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities

Research Study #4: Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Multi-Component Demand-Side Intervention Toolkit for VR Professionals to Improve Employment Outcomes of People with Physical Disabilities: A Randomized Controlled Trial Study



Soft Skills Intervention for College Students with Physical Disabilities

Introduction

The frequently used term, *soft skills*, is an umbrella term that captures the multitude of interpersonal qualities, people skills, and personal attributes that can be used in the workplace to effectively navigate the social environment (Phillips Deiches, Morrison, & Kaseroff, 2015; Robles, 2012). Many soft skills have been identified as essential to the workplace, including initiative, integrity, flexibility, communication, positive attitude, social skills, and work ethic (Gibert, Tozer, & Westoby, 2017; Robles, 2012). It is impossible to overestimate the importance of soft skills to employment outcomes. In fact, many companies openly share their strategy to hire for and train for skill (e.g., Taylor, 2011). Rehabilitation professionals have long recognized soft skills as a critical consideration of any plan for employment (Phillips, Kaseroff, Fleming, & Huck, 2014), and research supports its emphasis (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

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Skills to Pay the Bills Curriculum

Focus has increasingly been given to the development of soft skills alongside the more traditional hard skills that have been part of the high school and college training experience. A curriculum titled Skills to Pay the Bills serves as one of the more notable interventions in this area that was initially developed to aid high school students in the development and use of soft skills. It covers six core areas:

- (a) communication,
- (b) positive attitude,
- (c) teamwork,
- (d) networking,
- (e) problem solving, and
- (f) professionalism.

As a relatively new training that was originally targeted to the general high school population, there is still much to learn about its application, particularly in relation to young adults and those with disabilities.

Soft Skills and Physical Disability

Among people with disabilities, primary attention to soft skills has understandably been given to disabilities such as autism and the range of psychiatric conditions. That said, physical disability, although not defined by social deficits as some other disability conditions, have been shown to effect soft skills of same-age peers (Lindsay, McDougall, Sanford, Menna-Dack, Kingsnorth, & Adams, 2015). The potential application of soft skills training has long been recognized in rehabilitation, with one of the first soft skill interventions created by Beatrice Wright (1960) being tar-



geted at people with physical disabilities. However, little has been done to shed light on the soft skill needs of people with physical disabilities in recent years, and no known attempts have been made to use the *Skills to Pay the Bills* training with college students with disabilities. This brief describes a pilot study that assessed the effectiveness of training on a number of desired educational and labor market outcomes. The research question was addressed using a randomized controlled trial study: Does *Skills to Pay the Bills* improve the soft skills of people with physical disabilities?

Method

The study team first undertook a comprehensive review of the *Skills to Pay the Bills* curriculum to assess the appropriateness of the content and activities for a college population of people with physical disabilities. An expert panel worked with the study team to make and approve of all suggested changes while staying true to the basic framework of the curriculum. Recruitment of college students with physical disabilities was attempted on four university or college campuses, with three in the Midwest and one in the Southwest. However, the length and commitment of the six session (approximately two hours each) intervention appeared to deter participants. One randomized controlled trial was eventually completed with seven people with physical disabilities in each of the intervention and control groups. These preliminary findings are reported here.

Results

Despite the small sample size, results are promising for the use of *Skills to Pay the Bills* with college students with physical disabilities. Statistically significant differences between intervention and control groups were detected in social-problem solving, and other outcomes measures of social self-efficacy, and expectations for employment success showed improvements in the intervention group that approximated significance.

Conclusions

Although only preliminary, these results support the use of a *Skills to Pay the Bills* training that is customized to college students. Future research will need to consider ways for accessing and recruiting the target population of people with physical disability and also the appropriateness of the length of training. Finally, any efforts to improve soft skills must eventually be measured by real-world outcome measures that convey notable improvements in navigating the social environments of the labor market.

References

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Acknowledgements:

This product was developed by VCU-RRTC on Employment for People with Physical Disabilities (VCU-RRTC) that is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) grant #90RT503502. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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