

Focus groups on employment related soft skills for transition age youth with disabilities

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Work-related soft skills can be an important factor for successful employment outcomes, particularly for individuals with disabilities.

OBJECTIVE: This study conducted two focus groups with stakeholders for two state Rehabilitation Councils to identify the needs of specific work-related soft skills for employment success of transition age youth with disabilities.

METHODS: 30 participants including 10 individuals with disabilities, 5 family members of individuals with disabilities, 5 disability service providers, 9 disability advocates and 1 unidentified, completed two focus groups to identify a list of soft skills by importance for transition age youth with disabilities to succeed at work.

RESULTS: Focus group participants reported that communication skills (face to face communication and emails to coworkers, customers, and employers), conflict resolution skills, advocacy skills, and professionalism are the most important soft skills for transition age youth with disabilities to be successful at work.

CONCLUSION: Findings indicated soft skills are critical to work success for transition age youth with disabilities. Vocational rehabilitation providers should teach these critical soft skills when serving transition age youth with disabilities.

Keywords: Soft skills, work, youth, disabilities, State Rehabilitation Council, qualitative

1. Introduction

Individuals with disabilities benefit from employment by having improved financial security, self-confidence, quality of life, and sense of community (Lindsay et al., 2018). A meaningful job provides structure, socialization opportunities, community

integration, and improves health, self-worth, and peer respect (Angrave & Charlwood, 2015; Boreham et al., 2016; Julià et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2017). Furthermore, employers can benefit by hiring people with disabilities such as through increases in profitability and an inclusive work culture (Lindsay et al., 2018).

However, persons with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed across all age groups than persons without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2021). Importantly, transition age youth (TAY) with disabilities continue to face unique employment barriers despite legislative efforts. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA

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section 7(42) of the Act and §361.5(c) (58)] defines TAY as between 14 and 24 years old. There is a significant gap in labor force participation rates for young people with and without a disability, and the gap increases from 12.5% for ages 16–19 to 25.3% for ages 20–24 (BLS, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). TAY with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed and living in poverty (Davis, 2018; Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Researchers, academics, and practitioners continue to address the development of soft skills as an important factor in achieving and maintaining competitive employment for TAY with disabilities (Bishop, 2019; Clark et al., 2019; Lagomarcino & Rusch, 1989; Martin et al., 1986; Murray & Doren, 2013). Research on soft skills and employment is extensive and has a historical precedent in the United States. Seminal research dates back to the 1980s and 1990s (Hanley-Maxwell et al., 1986; Heal et al., 1990; Heal & Rusch, 1994; Heal & Rusch, 1995; Lagomarcino & Rusch, 1989; Martin et al., 1986; Chadsey-Rusch, 1992). Persons with disabilities have faced barriers to ascertaining and maintaining employment due to a variety of factors including behavioral issues, lack of soft skills, and lack of productivity while on the job (Hanley-Maxwell et al., 1986; Martin et al., 1986).

Lagomarcino and Rusch (1989) demonstrated the effectiveness of self-management procedures in improving the work performance of people with cognitive disabilities. Successful job placement for individuals with disabilities is linked to agency follow-up support, home support, person's job skills and soft skills or social ability, among other factors (Heal et al., 1990). Important factors for post-high school residential independence for TAY with disabilities are successful employment, and soft skills contribute to a person's success at work (Heal & Rusch, 1994).

Studies among a nationally representative sample of special education students who were interviewed five years post high school graduation indicated that, higher levels of communication, self-feeding, self-dressing, ability to get to places, self-advocacy, classroom social score, and household responsibilities were associated with higher rates of competitive employment (Wehman, 2014). Generally, employment rates increased with the level of a youth's self-advocacy. Additionally, competitive employment rates were higher for students who participated in school-sponsored activities than for students who did not (Wehman, 2014).

Recent research from Martin et al. (2015) has found skills such as goal setting and attainment, in addition to self-advocacy as necessary for successful post-secondary transition among students with disabilities. Factors such as utilization of resources, persistence, proactive involvement, and disability awareness were also important for post-school transition to employment (McConnell et al., 2015).

Factors such as gaps or lack of work history, lack of long term supports, disability disclosure, lack of transportation and managing disability-related barriers all contribute to lower levels of labor market participation and employment (Davis et al., 2012; Noel et al., 2017; Risen et al., 2014). However, studies found that developing work-related soft skills is critical in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment for TAY with disabilities (Bishop, 2019; Clark et al., 2019).

Early employment interventions among TAY with disabilities are key to decreasing individuals' dependence on disability benefits (Cook et al., 2016; Salkever, 2013). While supported employment (SE) models, (e.g., Individual Placement and Support [IPS]), can improve employment outcomes among people with serious mental illness (SMI) (Drake et al., 2012; Luciano & Meara, 2014; Modini et al., 2016; Mueser & Cook, 2016), innovations including cognitive enhancement, work related soft skills training, and supported education are also needed to increase job tenure and wages (Christensen et al., 2019; Killackey et al., 2017; McGurk et al., 2015). Additional research on effectively delivering employment services to TAY prior to the disability determination process is essential (Cook et al., 2016).

TAY typically begin to engage in major adult life activities such as employment around ages 15 to 16 (Davis et al., 2012). Youth with disabilities between 14 to 24 years old often have difficulty finding evidence-based services that aid the transition to adulthood and thus may experience significant employment barriers (Osgood et al., 2010; Stewart, et al., 2014). One in seven youth in economically developed countries struggles transitioning from education to work [OECD, 2021]. In the U.S., the average percentage of youth between the ages of 15 to 29 not in education, employment, or training (NEET) from 2005 to 2020 was 14.2% (OECD, 2021). Longitudinal analyses suggest that NEET youth experience poorer labor force attachment development. NEET-status limits their ability to gain skills, to gain labor-market attachment, and is associated with unfavorable career and social outcomes (Bäckman &

Nillson, 2016). There is also evidence that NEET status individuals have higher rates of mental health conditions and substance use (Gariépy et al., 2021). In a nationally representative U.K. cohort, having fewer “soft” skills (e.g., problem-solving, leadership, and time management) was associated with NEET status among TAY (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016).

TAY with mental health conditions, particularly those transitioning from school to work, struggle to secure permanent, paid employment (Müller & VanGilder, 2014; Olesen et al., 2013). Wagner and Newman (2012) found that youth with emotional disturbances were behind the general population in positive transition outcomes and had higher rates of criminal justice involvements. Analyses show that although 91.2% of TAY with mental health conditions were employed at some point during the eight years after graduating from high school, only 49.6% were employed at the time of the interview eight years after high school (Wagner et al., 2012). Studies have attributed the higher unemployment rates to underdeveloped soft and educational skills, gaps in employment history, and fear of disability disclosure (Bendassolli et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2013; Marelli et al., 2013; Saavedra et al., 2015).

Inadequate job-related soft skills were associated with poorer employment outcomes, including higher rates of unemployment and represented 90% of job losses for adolescents with mental health conditions (Ebuenyi et al., 2018; Shaukat et al., 2017; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Soft skills are being increasingly recognized as important in maintaining employment and complement “hard” technical employment skills (Kyllonen, 2013; Pierce, 2019; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Lack of soft skills is also often cited as a major reason for involuntary job loss (Tulgan, 2015). As such, research suggests that TAY with mental health conditions can benefit from acquiring employment related soft skills (Clark et al., 2018; Ritter et al., 2018).

Employers have placed an increased emphasis on the importance of soft skills for employability, which combine social, emotional, and interpersonal skills that aid professional and personal life (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Soft skills have also been associated with higher job satisfaction, stronger teamwork, better communication, longer job tenure, career advancement and better collaboration among coworkers, supervisors, and management (Boreham et al., 2016; Burning Glass Technologies, 2017; Kyllonen, 2013).

Soft skills consist of several competencies for life and work that can be acquired through education

and training such as communication, self-advocacy, and appropriate interpersonal skills. Soft skills are also typically developed through work experience, which TAY with disabilities tend not to have (BLS, 2021; U.S. Department of Labor, 2021; Davis, 2018; Lindstrom et al., 2013). Notably, researchers stressed inconsistent or absent assessment of these skills and suggested more comprehensive evaluation (Clark et al., 2019; Clarke, 2018; Deep et al., 2020; Lindstrom et al., 2013).

Rehabilitation professionals and researchers have attempted to address the importance of soft skills training and retention among individuals with disabilities. Soft skills training curricula have been developed to address the gaps of effective soft skills knowledge and usage for individuals with disabilities of varying ages (Clark et al., 2019; Murray & Doren, 2013). Unfortunately, soft skill literature focuses on generalized vocational and skill training and does not emphasize measurable behavioral skills (Lu et al., 2022). Touloumakos (2020) observed the term ‘soft skills’ signifies a wide range of qualities, traits, and values, in addition to more specific constructs. The lack of development in assigning characteristics to soft skills, which influences curriculum design, may be problematic in several respects. One is that soft skills have been characterized as a set of decontextualized behaviors that are transferrable between contexts. Another has been that soft skills can be ambiguously defined, and existing trainings may not sufficiently emphasize the behavioral aspects of utilizing soft skills in appropriate contexts (Lu et al., 2022; Touloumakos, 2020).

It is important to address workplace readiness and work ability by exploring the needs of a person with a disability from an array of perspectives. This can be facilitated by conducting focus groups, which allow participants to discuss, agree, disagree, and collaborate with each other over offered opinions and often produce a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences and beliefs (Dolce & Bates, 2018; McDonough et al., 2021; Possemato et al., 2018). This methodology is especially valuable in drawing out insights of individuals who have been overlooked, unheard, or underserved in previous research. Focus groups have been considered the most appropriate method to explore perceptions, experiences, and opinions of employees with disabilities (Efimov et al., 2020).

Importantly, focus group studies sometimes rely on a single group for information, or a team of “experts”. For example, Shon et al. (2020) utilized

a focus group to interview several “policy elites” to determine the accessibility of health information for persons with disabilities. Additionally, a study conducted with three focus groups regarding Human Resources professionals’ views on desirable characteristics for prospective employees with psychiatric disabilities identified four themes: reliability, ability to get the job done, flexibility, and interpersonal skills (Dolce & Bates, 2018). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of literature on focus groups about employment conducted with people with disabilities (Kaehne & O’Connell, 2010; Kroll et al., 2007; Trevisan, 2021; Wright, 2017).

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed no reports of qualitative studies of employment-related service needs for soft skills training for TAYs with disabilities. The current project includes focus groups among individuals representing multiple stake holders (i.e., persons with disabilities, family members, advocates, service providers) to capture a wider range of information. Most importantly, people with disabilities and their perspectives were represented in this project. Disability rights movements have advocated that disability research should include the perspective of persons with lived experience of disabilities (Charlton, 1998; Funnell et al., 2020; Jackson & Moorley, 2022; Mathews, 2021; Mmatli, 2009; Nwaba et al., 2021).

A client-centered and public involvement approach is needed when planning the development of soft skills curriculum and training techniques (Brett et al., 2014; Del Campo et al., 2011; Kastner et al., 2015; Qaseem et al., 2012; Tong et al., 2012). The end users for these training programs consist of persons with disabilities, family members, service providers, and advocates. Greater public and end-user involvement in research has been frequently endorsed in the expansion of interventions (Coon et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2002). Service systems are comprised of individuals with a wide range of values, roles (i.e., provider, advocate, family member, service-user), and beliefs within a social, political, and environmental context. Including a wider variety of roles and views into the establishment of a service system or intervention could lead to more dynamic knowledge generated, and further improve the development and implementation of service planning and interventions (Sheikh et al., 2014). This approach may result in an overall improvement in planning, interventions, and systems.

One method to learn more about the values, priorities, and concerns of end-users that may inform service planning is to implement a focus group

to identify soft skills considered most important or essential in securing meaningful employment (Grundy et al., 2019). This highlights the principle of client and public involvement in guideline development which emphasizes the reduction of systematic discrimination against this population, recognizes their rights in healthcare decisions, and results in greater person-centered disability services (Armstrong et al., 2018; Wicks et al., 2018; Wiering et al., 2017).

The current study utilized focus groups to understand better the most important and desired soft skills for TAY with disabilities to inform the development of employment skills teaching curricula that reflect an effective and practical approach of employment soft skills training for TAY with disabilities.

2. Methods

This study reports findings of two focus groups from two separate State Rehabilitation Councils (SRCs). State vocational rehabilitation agencies are required by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to have a SRC. The SRC collaborates with the VR agency in administering the VR program. Among its several responsibilities, the SRC reviews, evaluates, and advises the VR agency regarding its performance and effectiveness in delivering services, including the effect of service provision on the achievement of employment outcomes by individuals with disabilities (Rehabilitation Services Administration [RSA], n.d.). Per RSA mandate, the majority of SRC membership must be individuals with disabilities. Membership also includes representatives of business, industry and labor communities; rehabilitation provider agencies; parent training and information center; disability advocacy groups; the Client Assistance program (CAP), the State Independent Living Council (SILC), and representatives from other state agencies including state education.

There were two focus groups as part of this study. One was conducted with SRC members from a general state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, and the other was conducted with SRC members for a state VR agency providing services to individuals with visual impairments and blindness. Both operated under the same RSA mandates, and in both SRCs, members were appointed by the governor of the state.

In the focus group conducted with the SRC members for the general state VR agency, a total of 15 SRC members participated in the study. In the focus

Table 1
 Characteristics of focus group participants (N = 30)

	General Agency SRC		Specialized Agency SRC		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Classification using primary roles						
Individuals with Disabilities	7	46.7%	3	20.0%	10	33.3%
Family Member	1	6.7%	4	26.7%	5	16.7%
Provider	3	20.0%	2	13.3%	5	16.7%
Advocate	4	26.7%	5	33.3%	9	30.0%
Missing	0	0%	1	6.7%	1	3.3%

group for the specialized state VR agency, there were another 15 participants. Focus group members completed a questionnaire about their affiliation with the following roles, a person with disability, a family member, a provider, and an advocate. They were instructed to check off all the roles they were affiliated with. Table 1 provides the identified roles and percentage breakdown of participants. Although both SRCs met RSA requirements for members with disabilities, members did not necessarily identify this as their primary role.

2.1. Procedure

Participants were recruited from the two SRCs previously mentioned. A researcher contacted SRC chairs to determine if SRC members would be interested in this study and to request an invitation to present the study. All focus group participants provided written consent and the study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Each focus group was moderated by a faculty member assisted by one or two graduate assistants. Graduate assistants took notes of the discussions for the focus groups. Analyses of these group notes were compared after the group, and the final document was used as the basis for coding.

2.2. Measures

Participants were provided a self-report measure that asked them to self-identify their role as a person with a disability, a family member, a service provider, or an advocate.

The questions guiding discussion of both focus groups were: What do you think are the most important “soft skills” for transition age youth with disabilities to be successful at work? Which one is the most important? What are your reasons for selecting this as the most important? If the transition age individual was using this skill well, what would it look like?

2.3. Data analysis

Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS 26. Two master’s level researchers who were not involved in data collection independently reviewed open-ended questions, analyzed their content, and coded responses into themes that were then compared; these coders are co-authors on this paper. Discrepancies in identified themes between researchers were reviewed and discussed until a consensus was reached. The data analysis process in this investigation consisted of an initial open coding of the participants’ responses from the transcripts into initial themes. After several iterations, there was a final selective coding process among the reviewers which determined the core themes and concepts (Creswell, 2014; Krathwohl, 1993).

3. Results

Analyses are based on all 30 participants. Many participants identified with multiple roles. For example, (a) one participant with disabilities also identified as a provider; (b) one participant with disabilities also identified as a family member and advocate; (c) one person with disabilities also identified as a family member and provider; (d) four family members also identified as advocates; (e) one family member identified as a provider and advocate; and (f) one provider identified as an advocate. Those who reported multiple roles were coded according to the person’s primary role in the following order of proximity toward being a person with a disability: individuals with disabilities, followed by family members, providers, and advocates. For example, an individual with disabilities would be the priority role rather than an advocate, if the individual identified as both. Among the individuals who self-identified as having a disability, many also endorsed other roles such as provider, family member, advocate, or in combination, for example, advocate and provider, or advocate,

family member and provider. In those cases, the person's self-identified primary role was counted as an individual with disabilities. Therefore, regarding the classification of primary roles, 10 (33.3%) identified as individuals with disabilities, 5 (16.7%) as

family members, 5 (16.7%) as service providers, 9 (30.0%) as advocates, and 1 (3.3%) identity was missing (Table 1).

Responses to focus group questions are described below and detailed in Tables 2–5. Four themes devel-

Table 2
Themes and illustrative quotes for responses to question # 1: What are the most important “soft skills” for transition age youth with disabilities to be able to do to be successful at work?

Themes	Illustrative Participant Responses
Interpersonal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The most important soft skill is] recognizing importance of timely responses [to] email communication, over the phone and face-to-face [and understanding] what is acceptable [to message] and when [to send an email/text]. [Individuals with disabilities send correspondence that is] too informal, too infrequent [and there is] little coaching around that.
(How to communicate with coworkers, customers, bosses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The most important soft skill is] being able to communicate in the workplace and teach conversation scripts to teach how to develop conversation at break/lunchtime. [It is important to understand that an individual] does not need to open up [their] lives for everybody [and they can] discuss basic things like TV/football. [They can learn] small talk, talking about basic things/topics, conversation openers [to build relationships and help keep their job]. – Networking is a skill that people struggle with, [when an individual is] out in other environments, [it] can be difficult interacting with “normal” people. – [The most important skill is to learn about] what can/cannot be said [in the workplace]. [It is important to use] appropriate language for the workplace. – [Another important skill is] knowing how to deal with attitudes of the public. – What constitutes sexual harassment and what to do instead – I think it's also very important for the individual to be able to communicate with coworkers and have some kind of camaraderie or know how to —be part of a team. – We had a person with autism who worked in administration and when the boss asked for a report, she responded with “I'll get back to you when I can” – So, another different thing is people talk about interpersonal relationship, I think something as simple as eye contact needs to be taught.
Conflict Resolution/ Accepting Criticism or Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The skill of conflict resolution is important when] dealing with authority or fellow employees when there is a disagreement, [the transition age youth] may want to quit, [we need to] teach [the transition age youth] how to deal with disagreement [instead of quitting]. – Conflict resolution is a skillset that is often rather lacking. [It is important to have the] ability to manage a situation that is not the ideal level of patience [and having] tolerance. All parts of conflict resolution is absolutely essential. – Knowing what to do when they are stressed, when they have a conflict with others, knowing what to do when they don't know what to do with the work they are doing. Just being aware of the resources, I guess.
Advocacy (asking clarification, asking for help)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The skill of advocacy is important so individuals are] able to communicate in the workplace and let colleagues in the workplace know who they are so they are not pointed at. – Self-advocacy [is important to tell a supervisor] what they need in a workplace to work for them. – [An individual needs to] understand [workplace] structure and [determine the] go to person for accommodation requests. – Asking clarifying questions—the whole idea, if I don't understand—even what the tasks are, ask.
Self-Management/ Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The skill of self-management is important to learn] independence versus productivity, when to ask for help [and] how to recognize you have asked too much. – Showing up and being on time. – Use of workplace culture. So, the culture—being dressed, how people talk to each other, who talks to who, when it's not okay to knock on the door, when it is. – To recognize on-task behavior and productivity. – I have a real basic one—just showing up. Being there. – Appropriate dress and hygiene. – I don't know exactly what it's called, but when you finish a task what do you do? So, do you just stand there or sit there and do nothing, or do you go, “what do you have for me to do now?” So, I'm not sure if that's included or what you call that, but it's— – Yeah, transitioning between tasks. Yeah, being part of a team—like, yeah, I finished this, and now I'm going to sit here and just play on my phone until someone else sees I have nothing to do and gives me something else to do. It seems like that's a whole set of skills—completing a task, clarifying when you have a question, letting someone know when you completed a task, it's sort of this whole before, during, and after.

oped from the focus group. The results are organized to demonstrate common themes. The four themes that emerged in response to question one (“What do you think are the most important soft skills for transition age youth with disabilities to be successful at work?”) were 1.) Interpersonal communication; 2.) Conflict resolution; 3.) Advocacy; and 4.) Self-management/Professionalism.

Interpersonal communication (i.e., how to communicate with coworkers, customers, bosses) was identified as an important skill because “being able to communicate in the workplace” and knowing “what can/cannot be said in the workplace” are essential for workplace success. Some participants who prioritized interpersonal communication were quoted saying, “[The most important soft skill is] being able to communicate in the workplace and teach conversation scripts on how to develop conversation at break/lunchtime. [It is important to understand that an individual] does not need to open up [their] lives for everybody [and they can] discuss basic things like TV/football. [They can learn] small talk, talking about basic things/topics, conversation openers [to build relationships and help keep their job].” Another illustrative response was: “Knowing how to communicate to your superiors as well as your subordinates and colleagues from a social point of view so you can have effective communication with the organization”. Altogether, interpersonal communication pertained to respectful and appropriate communication with people in the workplace (e.g., customers, coworkers, and managers) including via emails, text, and face to face.

Conflict resolution was described as “the ability to manage a situation that is not the ideal level of patience [and having] tolerance” including “knowing how to accept criticism” and was related to interpersonal communication. One participant defined conflict resolution as, “dealing with authority or fellow employees when there is a disagreement, [the transition age youth] may want to quit, [we need to] teach [the transition age youth] how to deal with disagreement [instead of quitting]”. Participants also noted the importance of this skill and how it may be lacking among workers.

Advocacy was described as an important skill because TAY with disabilities need to “understand [workplace] structure and [determine the] go to person for accommodation requests”. One participant said, “Self-advocacy [is important to tell a supervisor] what they need in a workplace to work for them”. Another participant identified advocacy as asking for

help, saying, “Asking clarifying questions—the whole idea, if I don’t understand—even what the tasks are, ask”.

Finally, self-management/professionalism was described as “when to ask for help [and] how to recognize you have asked too much”. One participant noted the importance of self-management/professionalism and related it to the workers’ ability to not rely on others for job responsibilities they have learned to perform. Another participant identified it as simply, “Showing up and being on time”. A third participant thought it to be, “To recognize on-task behavior and productivity”. Another participant mentioned, “appropriate dress and hygiene” as essential to professionalism.

The four major themes from question two (“Which soft skill is the most important?”) are as follows: 1) Conflict resolution; 2) Advocacy; and 3) Interpersonal communication, and 4) Self-Management/Professionalism/Workplace culture (Table 3). For conflict resolution as the most important soft skill, one participant stated, “[The most important soft skill is] conflict resolution, especially when [some transition aged youth or individuals with disabilities] say “I’m quitting” after having a disagreement and they’re ready to quit.” Another participant talked about conflict resolution as, “there’s a problem, how to resolve. As opposed to hiding it or pretending it’s not there. Or just sitting there and doing nothing. And going home and quitting.”

Some participants listed advocacy as the most important. One participant described advocacy as the “need to learn that someone is not always going to do it for them” and “[advocating for yourself] and being honest about what you can or cannot do”. Another participant described advocacy as, “finding a safe person to ask a question if you need clarification. As opposed to hiding it or pretending it’s not there”, “Or just sitting there and doing nothing”.

For some, interpersonal communication was described as the most important soft skill because “negotiating interpersonal relationships at work” and understanding the “setting and rules” are essential. Another participant described interpersonal communication as, “[The most important skill is] negotiating interpersonal relationships at work, networking [with other employees], [understanding how to] handle self in breakroom, [fostering a] human relationship [is] part of [being involved at the] workplace and all that entails”.

Finally, some mentioned self-management/professionalism as the most important. This related

Table 3
Themes and illustrative quotes for responses to question # 2: Which one (soft skill) is the most important?

Themes	Illustrative Participant Responses
Conflict Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The most important skill is] conflict resolution, especially when [some transition aged youth or individuals with disabilities] say “I’m quitting” after having a disagreement and they’re ready to quit. – Self-regulation also in terms of understanding your boundaries. Both not letting someone push your boundaries, but also understanding how to not push the boundaries of others. Violating personal space—a lot of our guys get in trouble just because they don’t understand that. – There’s a problem, how to resolve. As opposed to hiding it or pretending it’s not there.
Self-Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [Advocating for yourself and] being honest about what you can or cannot do [in the workplace] without compromising important info. – Self-advocacy [is important in the workplace because an individual] needs to learn that someone is not always going to do it for them. – Finding the right person to ask when you have trouble. I think in a workplace that’s equally important. Finding a safe person to ask a question if you need clarification.
Interpersonal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [The most important skill is] negotiating interpersonal relationships at work, networking [with other employees], [understanding how to] handle self in breakroom, [fostering a] human relationship [is] part of [being involved at the] workplace and all that entails – [It is important to understand the workplace] culture, understand [the] setting and rules [on the job]. [An individual needs to understand whether to wear a] white shirt or tie. [It is essential to] know [the] environment you’re working in. – you have people who have really significantly limited communication—with practice, with working on these issues in a job environment, simulated environment, people do make improvements. – But I think the key to being successful in the job is learning strategies so that you then do fit in.
Self-Management/ Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prioritizing your effort when you get to work. So, you’re working on your work tasks—so the ability to come in and start working. – Because then you’re telling people to go in and understand what’s the unspoken rules. – Work place culture, because that captures a lot of what we’re talking about.

to how people approach their work and interact with the workplace environment. One participant described the concept as “the ability to come in and start working”. Additionally, the concept was described as knowing the “unspoken rules and culture” of the workplace.

Question three asked, “what are your reasons for selecting this as the most important soft skill”? One participant explained that they selected conflict resolution because “an individual will have the skills to address [conflict] amicably” (Table 4). Advocacy was understood as closely related to conflict resolution. A participant described advocacy as the most important skill because it “goes with conflict resolution”. Interpersonal communication was selected because it is important to learn “how to talk to others” in the workplace. Additionally, interpersonal communication skills were deemed important since people need to “identify when to communicate with others such as employers, parents, or friends”. Finally, some participants mentioned the importance of self-management/professionalism. This concept was characterized as understanding “your boundaries and not letting others push them or pushing others boundaries” as well as identifying supports in the workplace (i.e., “the right person to ask when you have trouble”) were deemed important as contributors to success in workplace environments.

Question four asked, “If the transition age individual were using this skill well, what would it look like”? Responses focused on interpersonal communication and conflict resolution. One participant stated that it would look like a person who “has strong interpersonal skills” and is “an employee who can advance in their career” by “building networking, increase in pay, create a broader scope of where you can advance, [which] allows over time to increase responsibility” (Table 5). Another participant described enacting interpersonal skills successfully as “figure out what they can do to continue their own path and seek support along the way”.

In general, participants agreed TAY with disabilities who are demonstrating conflict resolution will use ‘I’ statements, not ‘you’ statements and have the ability to “see the situation from a different perspective”. One participant described it as “decision making, looking at pros/cons” and “when to let go of something”. If TAY were using advocacy well, they would “find work, internships [and] doing well moving onto work experience opportunities”. Another individual described it as “going to the boss and explaining why things might not work out – express calmly their troubles.”

When asked what would it look like when TAY with disabilities used soft skills well, one participant,

Table 4

Themes and illustrative quotes for responses to question # 3: What are your reasons for selecting this as the most important?

Themes	Illustrative Participant Responses
Conflict Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conflict resolution [is the most important skill because an individual will] have skills to address amicably. - [This is the most important skill because an individual will] need [the] skill to resolve conflict.
Self-Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [The skill of advocacy is important and] goes with conflict resolution - Knowing when and where to get help. Or, if there's a problem, how to resolve. As opposed to hiding it or pretending it's not there. Or just sitting there and doing nothing. And going home and quitting.
Interpersonal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [Interpersonal and communication skills are most important to identify when] do you talk to [a] parent, friend, or employer?
Self-Management/ Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [This skill is important to learn] how to talk to others [in the workplace]. - Self-regulation also in terms of understanding your boundaries. Both not letting someone push your boundaries, but also understanding how to not push the boundaries of others. Violating personal space-a lot of our guys get in trouble just because they don't understand that. - Finding the right person to ask when you have trouble. I think in a workplace that's equally important. Finding a safe person to ask a question if you need clarification. - Just showing up. Being there. On time.

Table 5

Themes and illustrative quotes for responses to question # 4: If the transition age individual was using this skill well, what would it look like?

Themes	Illustrative Participant Responses
Conflict Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [If a TAY is using conflict resolution well it] can foster [an] environment where people can explore issues, understand issues and find solutions. - [The use of conflict resolution results in] "I" statements, not "you" statements. - Major part for conflict resolution is that ability to see situation from a different perspective or from another party's perspective and appreciate that opinion/approach, looking at intent and moving forward in constructive manner instead of quitting. - [Conflict resolution can foster] decision making, looking at pros/cons, [and knowing] when to let go of something. - [When a TAY is using conflict resolution, they will understand that you] don't have to like each other [coworkers] but do need to respect them.
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [A TAY using advocacy will be able to] find work, internships, [and] doing well moving onto work experience opportunities. - [TAYs using advocacy will look like] going to boss and explaining why things might not work out express calmly their troubles i.e., a change in work shift [and] explain what they need.
Interpersonal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A [TAY] obtains/has strong interpersonal skills, [is] an employee who can advance in their career, [can] build networking, [experience] increase in pay, create a broader scope of where you can advance, allows over time to increase responsibility. - [TAY's using interpersonal skills has] mastered networking skill, figure out what they can do to continue their own path and seek support along the way, [and] exudes confidence.
Self-Management/ Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working with the summer camp program-skills developed were really good work ethic. So, he eventually became in charge of attendance for trips, know where to get the folder. I witnessed him, you know, quieting a class down even with the teacher standing there. I asked, "you allow-he does this?" "Oh yeah, they listen to them." So, he knows the rules-if they're running, he says, "you can't be running in the hallway." He has developed work skills-kids respect him, he knows who to go to if he has a problem. So, really, with the staff supporting him, he has developed these work skills that now allow him—for them to give him more responsibilities and roles. Children can be tough, but they respect him. They really respect him. - I think in terms of vision of what it might look like if —someone doing it really well, the difference from other people would be minimized. Maybe a visible disability, yes, but other than those things, they would be one of the crew. - And that's how my son is looked at the Boys and Girls Club. They see him as another person they have to respect.

who was a parent of a TAY with a disability said their child "developed a really good work ethic," including assuming more of a leadership role ("in charge of attendance for trips"), following the rules, and

knowing to ask for help. Another participant said, "if someone is doing it really well, the difference from other people would be minimized; they would be one of the crew."

Although not related to one of the focus group questions, several participants expressed concern that TAY who lack soft skills may decide to quit the job or not come to work the next day rather than being able to address the situation. Participants also noted the importance of having soft skills in order to maintain employment and that lack of soft skills is a frequent reason for losing employment.

4. Discussion

Focus group participants representing various stakeholders including people with disabilities, family members, advocates, and providers reported that communication skills (in person verbal communication, emails to coworkers, customers, and employers), conflict resolution skills, advocacy skills, and professionalism are the most important soft skills for TAY with disabilities to be successful at work. Findings indicated developing soft skills is an integral part of the work skill set needed for TAY to be successful at work. Additionally, it would be helpful for vocational rehabilitation services to target and teach critical soft skills when preparing TAY with disabilities to get and, most importantly, keep competitive employment.

A recurring suggestion among the focus group participants was that these skills needed to be “taught” to TAY, emphasizing the need for better availability implementation of soft skills training. Based on their own professional and personal experience, participants contended that if TAY with disabilities were successfully utilizing these soft skills, they would improve career stability, autonomy on the job, advancement possibilities, and would experience greater societal integration. The ability to use these skills may be expected to lead to greater career/job satisfaction, longer job tenure, and a greater sense of social belonging.

Behavior specific skills for advocacy included being able to understand workplace structure, knowing who to go to for workplace requests, and asking clarifying questions. Behavior specific skills associated with interpersonal communication as suggested by focus group participants included understanding e-mail etiquette, such as, “what is acceptable [to message] and when [to send an email/text],” avoiding emails that are “too informal, too infrequent,” “appropriate language for the workplace,” “what can/cannot be said,” and how to develop a conversation during a break or lunchtime.

Other behavior specific skills related to interpersonal communication include, “talking about basic things like TV/football” and “[they can learn] small talk, talking about basic things/topics, conversation openers.” For the interpersonal communication domain, participants also indicated that “knowing how to deal with attitudes of the public,” “communicate with coworkers” and “become part of a team” were very important to being successful in the workplace. One participant indicated that things as simple as eye contact being taught enabled their success in the workplace. Behavior specific skills associated with conflict resolution were “knowing how to deal with a disagreement,” “knowing what to do when [they] are stressed,” and “knowing what to do when they don’t know what to do with the work they are doing.”

Behavior specific skills for self-management included being independent and productive, being able to “recognize on-task behavior,” knowing when to ask for help, and knowing how to transition between tasks. Additional important behavior skills related to self-management included “showing up and being on time,” understanding the workplace culture, including how people communicate with each other, when it’s appropriate to knock on a door, and the appropriate dress attire and hygiene for the workplace. Participants indicated it was also important to recognize skills that did not promote success, for example, being able to “recognize you have asked too much” or as one participant stated, “yeah, being part of a team-like, yeah, I finished this, and now I’m going to sit here and just play on my phone until someone else sees I have nothing to do and gives me something else to do.”

5. Conclusion

Additional research on soft skills training could focus on the behaviorally specific skills mentioned above. These behavior specific skills could potentially inform future curriculum development for soft skills training for TAY with disabilities. Unemployment in TAY with mental health conditions is largely attributed to underdeveloped social and educational skills, employment gaps, and fear of disability disclosure (Wagner & Newman, 2012; Burke et al., 2013; Carter & Wehby, 2003; Gresham et al., 2001). These behaviorally specific soft skills training could be critical for TAY with mental health conditions. These trainings can also be applied to adults with lived

experience with these disabilities, such as psychiatric disabilities. In fact, behavior specific skills have been recommended for social skills training for people living with schizophrenia (Bellack et al., 2004). For example, social skills training for schizophrenia recommends blinking eyes every few seconds or looking away occasionally during conversation to avoid staring (Bellack et al., 2004).

Several studies highlight similar conclusions regarding the efficacy of soft skills curricula and areas for future research (Cavanaugh & Giesen, 2012; Giesen & Cavanaugh, 2019; McDonnell & O'Mally, 2012). Prater et al. (2014) stated that soft skills such as self-advocacy should be observed between contexts as the environment could contribute to skill use efficacy. In a large systematic review of employment interventions for TAY with visual impairment, Cavanaugh & Giesen (2012) suggested positive effects for interventions that targeted job-seeking skills, soft skills, and involvement in career development activities, parental involvement, and work experience. However, the authors identified that the most important finding was the lack of published studies on effective, evidence-based employment interventions. Of 83 empirical studies, fewer than 15% were intervention studies, and only two reported significant differences between groups on employability factors. A further critique was the need to develop empirical strategies to design, implement, and evaluate soft skill interventions, and to better measure employment outcomes related to these interventions.

This study has several limitations important for consideration. Firstly, we have a small sample size, consisting of only two focus groups. Secondly, one of the focus groups was an SRC representing services for individuals with visual impairments or blindness. As a result, results may be less generalizable to a broad range of disability groups. This study sought to address this overlooked but important factor by including multiple perspectives including individuals with disabilities, family members and those having multiple roles in identifying critical work-related soft skills. Although there are existing soft skills curricula, there is little evidence to suggest they were developed with direct involvement of the persons with disabilities for whom they are intended. While this study did include many individuals with disability, an improvement in a future study would be to include a larger sample including TAY since they were not members of either SRC group. Also, in this study, only 33% of participants reported having a disability, although

half of SRC members must have a disability. There appears to be an underestimate of persons with disabilities who participated in this study due to RSA requirements for SRCs, which both SRCs met. While it is unclear why this occurred, it may be that participants did not view their primary role as being a person with a disability but rather endorsed their roles as advocates, family members or providers.

Findings suggest that TAY with disabilities need to learn soft skills to improve job tenure and reduce voluntary endings (i.e., walking away from a job). This is consistent with the literature, finding that voluntary quitting is the main reason workers with psychiatric disabilities leave their jobs (Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015). For example, studies have found that most workers with psychiatric disabilities left their job by voluntary ending or quitting (59%), whereas 17% left the job because they were fired, 10% left because they were laid off, and while 14% left because the job was temporary. Dissatisfaction at their job was the most reported reason for quitting. Younger workers were significantly more likely to voluntarily leave their jobs than older workers (Cook & Burke-Miller, 2015). However, the reasons TAY with disabilities lose their jobs needs to be researched further.

Future soft skills curricula may be informed by inviting perspectives of diverse stakeholders. The findings of this study included the perspectives of individuals with disabilities, family members, and advocates. The findings concurrently identified similar soft skills needed for TAY with disabilities to succeed at work (Lu et al., 2022). In that particular study, 183 stakeholders identified behaviorally specific interpersonal skills such as asking for help and responding to feedback as the most important soft skills for TAY with disabilities to learn (Lu et al., 2022). Participants also identified interview skills, advocating for accommodations, and negotiating conflicts as essential skills for TAY with disabilities to succeed at work (Lu et al., 2022). The importance of including perspectives from stakeholders other than experts or professionals in soft skills curriculum development will help build a user-friendly curriculum informed by lived experiences of people with disabilities. Future studies will also benefit from designing long-term follow-ups to measure soft skill retention and competitive employment.

In summary, the current study highlighted the importance of work-related soft skills development among TAY with disabilities from the perspective of diverse stakeholders. Results also provide a basis to advocate for the need for vocational services to teach

soft skills to improve employment outcomes of this population.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the institutional review board of Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (study ID: Pro20170001275).

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Informed consent

Participants provided written informed consent.

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