

TITLE: Can acquiring specific foundational career readiness skills through work-based learning programs enhance employment opportunities and retention for autistic individuals?

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Abstract:

This research explores how work-based learning (WBL) programs enhance employment outcomes for individuals with autism by improving their career readiness skills, addressing challenges such as professionalism, workplace etiquette, and communication. Surveys measure participants' progress, with supervisor feedback gauging program effectiveness, evaluating the impact of orientation programs on improving outcomes.

Background

Tech Kids Unlimited (TKU) is a non-profit educational center that offers technology workshops and work-based learning¹ (WBL) programs to neurodiverse students. Many students at TKU, who are autistic and have co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, OCD, and learning disabilities, face challenges when entering the workforce. TKU has implemented a career ladder of WBL programs, with the goal of increasing employment opportunities for neurodiverse learners.

The employment rates for individuals with disabilities, including autism, are notably low, despite increasing numbers pursuing higher education (Johnson, 2022). Autistic individuals face both low employment rates and lower pay compared to other disabled individuals (Johnson, 2022), partly due to communication and interaction challenges. Many autistic adults express a desire to work but encounter barriers like meeting interview requirements, understanding workplace social dynamics, multitasking, and following directions (Hendricks, 2010). These challenges stem from autism's impact on adaptive functioning and often coexist with conditions like anxiety, dyslexia, and ADHD. Learning workplace social norms could improve employment prospects. Past research has found that it is critical to identify strengths in autistic individuals in order to find meaningful jobs that are a good use of their skills (Cope & Remington, 2022). However, there is very little empirical research on WBL and its effects on the autistic population especially for ages 16 to 24.

CRISP

For the past four summers, TKU has developed and implemented an internship program as part of the career ladder programming for neurodiverse teens and young adults, called Career Readiness Internship Summer Program (CRISP). CRISP is a WBL program in which students ages 17-24 gain 5-6 weeks of employment experience by working on a specific tech project for an external worksite.² In 2023, CRISP worked with 18 worksites to place TKU interns. Interns also learn career readiness skills from TKU-staffed social workers and educators throughout the duration of the program. Some examples of past intern projects include (but are not limited to): video editing, social media post creation and management, updating websites, research and analytics, creating marketing materials and newsletter implementation,

¹ Work-based learning (WBL) is an umbrella term that involves employers and educational settings to offer students to take part in structured experiences that develop transferable skills for postsecondary education and the workplace (Work-Based Learning Programs, 2015).

² Employers are typically community partners, non-profits, or corporate sponsors of TKU, including Con Edison, Luv Michael, Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism, among other small businesses.

logo redesigns, and similar tech projects. The goal of CRISP is to help students gain internship experience and to help break down the barriers to gaining and retaining employment. This research aims to evaluate the CRISP program's effectiveness by using surveys from the 2023 and 2024 CRISP summer cohorts to answer our research questions.

Problem

Based on the Summer 2023 surveys from CRISP participants and intern supervisors, barriers to employment included decreased self-advocacy, communication clarity, interview and meeting etiquette, and difficulty with interns seeking guidance on tasks and performance. Eighty percent of the worksites said they would take another intern, but only 50% of worksites said they would be willing to hire the student as an employee. One supervisor replied "There were times that the end product was not exactly what I was asking...in the beginning, he would finish the task even if he was not sure about certain things then in the end he would mention that." Given these results, we have observed that merely placing autistic students in internships is not sufficient. We aim to improve supervisor feedback and to implement a new week-long orientation prior to the program start to address the common challenges that supervisors noted in their surveys in 2023.

Methods

This study will consist of 25 participants between the ages of 17-24 who are taking part in CRISP. They will have a one-week orientation program in which students will learn about career readiness before they begin their placement. This will build a foundation for the following five weeks of their internship. The orientation week will set interns up with an understanding of their overarching goals, and over the following weeks, each intern will work towards creating a plan or action steps that will get them closer to meaningful employment. Based on 2023 supervisor feedback, the key learning objectives that will be covered in this orientation are: Professionalism and Workplace Etiquette, Resume Development and Social Media Presence, Interview Skills and Employer Expectations, Time-Management and Stress Management, Effective Workplace Communication and Collaboration, Self-Advocacy and Understanding Rights.

Participant's achievement and understanding of the learning objectives will be measured before taking the orientation program and after completing CRISP through likert-style surveys made by TKU. The results of the first surveys and the last surveys will be compared in order to determine if there has been progress made. Supervisors were surveyed last year, and they will receive the same survey this year. The results will be compared to determine if the orientation program has been effective and if intern and supervisor feedback aligns. They will also get a pre-survey this year asking about expectations, which will be compared to the post-survey as well. The overall goal of this research is to determine if there is meaningful improvement after implementing the orientation program and what orientations for supervisors need to be in place in the future.

Questions:

- **Will the orientation improve outcomes when we evaluate feedback from supervisors and interns?**
- **Do supervisor and intern results align?**
- **What orientations for supervisors need to be in place for CRISP Summer 2025?**

References

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