

Early work experiences are important for subsequent employment for youth with disabilities

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A primary purpose of special education is to equip students with disabilities for a flourishing future after graduation. Yet, the

employment outcomes of youth with disabilities have continued to lag far behind their peers without disabilities. In an exhaustive review of the literature, researchers found that in most studies, youth with disabilities were much more likely to obtain work after participating in a school- or community-based intervention. They identify the strategies most likely to be effective and suggest areas for improvement in the quality of future studies in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

"We were interested in determining which interventions really work and identifying which strategies made up these interventions so educators and others can successfully connect transition-age [youth](#) with [disabilities](#) (aged 14–22) to employment as a way of elevating their later outcomes in adulthood," said coauthors Michele A. Schutz, Ph.D., and Erik W. Carter, Ph.D., Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, U.S. "Our findings highlight a number of promising pathways that schools and community programs can adopt that can make a real difference in the lives of youth."

While numerous studies have looked at the impact of various interventions on [employment outcomes](#) for youth with disabilities, the complexity of these programs—settings, components, and degree of individualization—make them challenging to evaluate.

The authors conducted a comprehensive systematic review of every study published over the last 40 years in which an [intervention](#) group was compared to a control group with regard to youth employment outcomes. Studies included in the review had to evaluate the impact of an intervention, as opposed to studies that predicted postschool outcomes.

Each study included a treatment and comparison group and assessed employment status in each group. From an initial pool of almost 4,000 publications, 25 met these criteria. Each article was coded for general study characteristics including [study design](#), participant characteristics,

and settings. The overall quality of each study was also graded, since methodological rigor is essential to establish evidence-based practices. The authors also examined the extent to which interventions led to employment.

While the effect size of the relationship between each intervention and employment status varied widely, nearly every intervention had a positive impact on youth employment status. Studies using interventions that directly placed youth within jobs were particularly successful in leading to later employment well after the intervention concluded.

Only some studies examined the effect of employment intervention on employment characteristics such as income, frequency of work, and availability of benefits. The authors observed that while securing employment is a central goal of transition intervention, it is equally important to connect youth with disabilities to jobs that meet their needs, lead to a future career, or can be maintained long-term. Further research is needed using measures of employment characteristics that represent "successful" employment.

Some studies were especially methodologically strong, while others had important weaknesses. "As a field we need to know much more about how well interventions were delivered and the types of services received by students who did not participate in an intervention," the authors explained. "Still, we were encouraged by the increasing rigor reflected in these studies over time."

"We were excited to see the array of approaches that school and community programs can draw upon to change the employment landscape for youth with disabilities," said Dr. Schutz and Dr. Carter. "This is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, and the interventions we reviewed incorporated a combination of practical and impactful strategies. Our hope is that we could give good guidance to schools

across the country that are committed to improving post-school outcomes for their students."

While the review identified an array of interventions that can increase the odds of employment for transition-age youth with disabilities, the highest quality studies with significant potential for employment were those that involved placing youth directly into work experiences.

Nearly all state and national metrics point to large gaps in the employment outcomes of youth with and without disabilities. The ongoing pandemic has only exacerbated these gaps, leaving large numbers of youth with disabilities outside of the local workforce.

The authors noted that this is a missed opportunity for businesses, which could benefit greatly from the skills, talents, passions, and contributions youth with disabilities bring to a workplace. Likewise, youth with disabilities miss out on opportunities to earn a paycheck, build their resumes, sharpen their skills, develop new relationships, and serve in valued roles.

"We hold great optimism that youth with disabilities can make a substantial and lasting impact in their communities through meaningful work. Promoting competitive, paid, and integrated [employment](#) in the community has garnered much more attention in policy and practice over the past couple of decades. We were pleased that a growing number of studies have tried to inform this national movement," Dr. Schutz and Dr. Carter concluded.

More information: Michele A. Schutz et al, Elevating the employment outcomes of transition-age youth with disabilities: Four decades of intervention research, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2022). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-221194](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-221194)

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