

READY FOR THE Workforce

ENGAGING STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SECONDARY LEARNERS EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS



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Preface

We truly love our students. The two of us have spent our entire careers, sixty-eight years collectively, as high school educators working to enrich students' lives in whatever way possible. But what does that mean, really? We bring students clothing to wear during interviews, send them home with food for the weekend, and support them emotionally when times are tough. We do our best to unconditionally care for *the whole student*. It was a natural step for us to create a curriculum that would provide students with skills they need to confidently enter the workforce.

To determine what would be key in training students for their future workplaces, we spent months meeting with numerous industry partners to pinpoint the skills that would positively impact workforce development. In addition to researching what was stated on a national level, we felt it important to collect information that reflected local perspectives, so we organized an open forum with more than twenty-five south-central Indiana employers situated within industries such as life science, advanced manufacturing, health science, postsecondary education, economic development, and commercial building construction. We asked that they answer the simple question, "What qualities are you looking for in an employee?" Common responses included the distinct abilities to learn tasks, be respectful of other people and one's environment, communicate effectively, and actively solve problems. For us, this local survey of essential skills became our compass, with both state and national lists of essential skills validating these skill sets. We wanted to not just go on our gut reactions to employers' needs but vet and evaluate them alongside the Indiana Department of Workforce Development's Employability Skills Benchmarks and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education's Employability Skills Framework. The skills that state and national agencies found to be essential reflected those that local industry partners cited. Using this input from local employers, as well as state and national data, we came up with core employability skills to develop into a teaching curriculum.

Once we agreed on the core skills, we gathered multiple experts together and began developing strategies and activities through which we would engage and empower students to gain these skills. Our initial curriculum format included sixteen core lessons that varied in duration and could be integrated across multiple subject areas. We launched the curriculum in schools across twelve counties and garnered positive feedback, which led to our receiving professional development training requests and offering both state and national presentations on the curriculum. These growing opportunities prompted us to write this book as a way to help other educators—resulting in a framework of nine skill sets that teachers can embed in their existing curricula.

Whether students' postsecondary plan is to pursue further education, join the military, or seek direct workforce placement, in our view, all learners are pursuing career goals requiring specific skills. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2016), "Employability skills, along with academic and technical skills, are an essential component of college and career readiness." Our work with learning targets around identified employability-skill components began simply from a need to provide, in an intentional manner, employability skills to students preparing to exit the high school setting. Creating a curriculum cross-walked with multiple academic standards provided a comprehensive skill alignment for workforce development. To ensure we truly reached all students and adhered to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (2018), also known as *Perkins V*, we built a framework using a universal design for learning methodology that would provide educators with the ability to establish employable workers. This framework included activities for all students because offering a continuum of training modalities for students of all learning levels is critical to successfully incorporating employability skills into classroom instruction.

In order to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of what we termed our Youth Employability Skills, or YES!, framework, we initiated a pilot effort first at our school, Hoosier Hills Career Center, and then at four comprehensive high schools, where our curriculum specialists tried out their lessons and others. Next, we presented to sixteen Indiana school systems, who then began using the framework. Participating teachers confirmed the ease of integrating the framework's activities into their existing curricular content and reported strong student engagement. Industry partners' input confirmed that our approach to teaching vital standards had indeed transformed into a powerful program of acquired skills. Our melding of education and industry had led to focused research, which had given life to the framework that we have shared with students and are now so delighted to share with you. We hope you find this framework as engaging and empowering as they have.

Introduction

Why have we written a book about the importance of teaching employability skills to students? First, so teachers can assist students in developing valuable skills for their futures; second, so teachers can help meet industry needs for a qualified workforce; and last, so schools can be in accordance with the U.S. Department of Education’s legislative mandates. But what undergirds these straightforward objectives is our real passion to ultimately make students’ and teachers’ lives richer and easier to navigate through practical means. In preparation for this, we’d like to discuss the nature of employability skills, review some of the educational initiatives and workforce programs that demonstrate the relevance of employability skills, outline the framework we developed, identify who will benefit from the book, and explore the book’s basic structure.

Employability Skills Explained

What are employability skills? They are the essential abilities or competencies necessary for an individual to be a dynamic, thriving member of the global workplace. Employers often talk about *soft skills* or *professional skills* as being those attributes that make a person a good employee. These interchangeable terms describe the same set of skills as employability skills—and as educators, we need to listen to what businesses and organizations need because our ultimate goal is to give our students the tools for them to succeed in their postgraduation lives.

Employability skills are becoming more important than academic and technical skills when it comes to success in the workforce. Jennifer Radin, Steve Hatfield, Jeff Schwartz, and Colleen Bordeaux (2020) of Deloitte write that “now, possibly more than ever, there appears to be an impetus for employees to bring their ‘soft’ skills—such as creativity, leadership, and critical thinking—to work.” “Wait a minute,” you

might say. “Do you mean employability skills have more relevance to professional success than the required academic or technical skills of a job do?” The hard truth is yes. Often, we hear employers state they can train any individual who has the willingness to learn but they cannot teach someone work ethic. Employers tell us that their companies can offer incentives, sign-on bonuses, and other reward systems to encourage current and potential employees but that, really, employees must be eager to meet employers’ expectations in order to succeed. That is why your role as an educator is of utmost importance. For you, the educator, the framework we outline in this book provides a step forward in building students’ workplace competence, which will entail embedding essential employability skills into your established curriculum—discussing the skills as they relate to a given content area and associated technical skills, as well as setting up classroom activities on these skills.

The Impetus for Our Work: Educational Initiatives and Workforce Programs

Those entering and transitioning into the workforce often lack the professional skills necessary to compete for entry-level or middle-skill positions. But there are federal, state, and local opportunities available, including educational initiatives and workforce development programs, that encourage educators and business leaders to connect youths and adults with relevant training in employability skill sets. These existing educational initiatives and workforce development programs give us a foundation for understanding employability skills and their relevance.

In the United States, the objective to empower educators and their students with college- and career-readiness plans and measures came to a head with the federal legislation known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Signed into law in 2015, ESSA mandates state and local public education agencies to educate and prepare all K–12 students to succeed in college and during their careers. ESSA requires education to align to business and industry needs for in-demand jobs by integrating employment content into rigorous academic standards. All fifty states are required to attend to ESSA guidelines for high school diplomas, according to the 2018 federal ruling (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Individual state requirements centered on workforce initiatives such as employability-skills training are forthcoming as workforce-alignment initiatives increase. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; several industry partners; and federal agencies created the national employability-skills framework as a guide for increasing college and career readiness (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2016).

You may already be familiar with the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (2018), also referred to as *Perkins V*. This act was passed to support educators in more fully nurturing academic rigor, technical knowledge, and employability skills in all secondary students and postsecondary students enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) programs. As with ESSA, the goal of Perkins V is to prepare all students for further education and for careers in current or emerging professions—in high-skill, high-wage, or in-demand occupations. Perkins V emphasizes *all* students by increasing employment opportunities for specific populations—including students with disabilities, those who are economically disadvantaged, and those in foster care or facing homelessness.

As federal programs, Perkins V and ESSA require all states to implement employability skills as well as college- and career-readiness content yet grant flexible means for educators to adhere to these mandates. Let's take a brief look at how a few U.S. states and organizations are responding to the need for solid workforce-pipeline development through employability-skills instruction.

Georgia is a leader in educational initiatives regarding career preparation and employability skills. Georgia was the first state to require all high school students to have a career pathway and in 2019 launched the International Skills Diploma Seal to signify workplace readiness (Georgia Department of Education, 2016, 2019). Georgia's career, technical, and agricultural education (CTAE) program recognizes pathway skills, leadership skills, and employability skills (Mann, 2018). From the work of the Georgia Employability Skills Task Force and other stakeholders, Georgia has identified four workforce-building priorities, with one centered on teaching employability skills throughout grades K–12 (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). These intentional opportunities for instruction center, in part, on developing a workforce with the explicit direction of industry needs, and they help nurture long-term, career-focused employees.

Wisconsin is known for having high-quality career centers, which offer multiple apprenticeship programs. In Wisconsin, work-based learning is encouraged for students to gain employability and occupational skills. The state's goal to reinforce the connection between work and school improves students' employment options and helps solidify their career interests. Students can earn a state-credentialed Youth Leadership and Employability Skills Certificate, which indicates they have acquired transferable skills and proven themselves career ready (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2015).

State industries, along with education, are identifying the need to upskill their current workforce and striving to meet ever-changing requirements. The Minnesota Job Skills Partnership, administered by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (2019), offers grants to support workforce development.

This partnership program allows business and education to work together to develop cooperative training for new or incumbent workers, tailoring the training to specific business needs. Also, the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership's Pathways Program focuses on providing new job and career pathways for individuals who are living below federal poverty guidelines or who are making the transition from public assistance to the workforce.

Skillful (2018), a nonprofit employee development initiative from the Markle Foundation, originated in Colorado in 2015 and then expanded to Indiana in 2018. Sponsored by Microsoft, Walmart, and the Lumina Foundation, Skillful aims to enable all Americans to obtain employment in an ever-changing economy. It works with employers to recruit and hire based on required skills, rather than on traditional educational prerequisites. It promotes using skills-based job postings to increase the talent pool and find the best potential candidates. Skillful also offers career-coaching training so that career coaches in workforce centers, secondary and postsecondary institutions, and nonprofit groups can better help individuals explore career options and create skills-based résumés. It uses this skills-based hiring methodology to address workforce development efforts (Skillful, 2018).

Data are important when evaluating initiatives; however, more important is the initiatives' personal impact on students and employees and their long-term quality of life. Living in a state with clearly defined expectations for employability skills and seeing those expectations' impact on young people transitioning into careers validates the importance of college and career readiness. And in keeping with the legislative requirements this book helps meet, we absolutely believe in teaching employability skills to *all* students. Often, educators hear that college is not for everyone and we need to be preparing non-college-bound students to enter the workforce immediately after graduation. Our philosophy is to prepare all students, learners at all levels, for their future, which will include a career. We want students to each reach their highest potential and be fully prepared for advancement opportunities. Our overall goal is to equip all students with skills that will be beneficial as they navigate their individual life courses.

Our Employability-Skills Framework

Our Youth Employability Skills, or YES!, framework provides students an opportunity to learn and cultivate the skills employers expect them to demonstrate—the essential attributes for success in the workplace. We created this framework to better meet the needs of our students and the business community. We enlisted the help of curriculum specialists to work alongside us as we researched a multitude of resources and instructional strategies and developed sixteen core topics around which educators could teach employability skills to middle and high school students. Initially, the