

Translating Employer Engagement Needs Assessment Findings Into Practice

Presenters: Kathy Sheppard-Jones and Christina Forster
Moderator: Kathleen Murphy

Wednesday, September 16, 2026

Virtual Meeting/Conference Recording Notice

The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) allows for the recording of audio, visuals, participants, and other information sent, verbalized, or used during business-related meetings.

This meeting is scheduled to be recorded by AIR. Your consent to the recording is requested. Participation in the meeting without expressing an objection to recording will be treated as consent. External artificial intelligence (AI) bots are prohibited unless specifically authorized.

Agenda

1. Welcome and housekeeping from the Knowledge Translation for Employment Research (KTER) Center
2. Introduction to presenters Kathy Sheppard-Jones and Christina Forster, University of Kentucky Human Development Institute
3. Overview of presentation objectives
4. Presentation content focused on key findings of employer engagement training needs conducted through the Training Innovation Project (TIP) and on how these findings can inform the design, development, and dissemination of research-based products and technical assistance for National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) grantees
5. Discussion

Meet the Presenters (1)



Kathy Sheppard-Jones, PhD, CRC, is the Principal Investigator for the **Training Innovation Project (TIP)** at the University of Kentucky (UK). During the past 25 years, she has worked on projects that build capacity, assess systems, and strive to improve life outcomes for people with disabilities. She is a former Executive Director of UK's Human Development Institute. She earned her doctorate in educational psychology and a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling from UK. She is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor. Her research interests include knowledge translation, leadership, universal design, technology, community education, and return-to-work.

Meet the Presenters (2)



Christina L. Forster is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) with more than 20 years of experience navigating complex employment- and disability-related services and conducting program evaluation. She joined the Human Development Institute Evaluation Unit in 2024 and supports multiple grant-funded projects focused on improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Her work on the **Training Innovation Project (TIP)** centers on evaluating and analyzing data, including key informant interview analysis, training evaluations, and other project assessment activities. This work builds on her prior experience with the National MS Society, where she led national employment, benefits, and health insurance initiatives, and with Virginia Vocational Rehabilitation, where she served as a vocational rehabilitation counselor helping people with disabilities achieve successful and sustainable employment outcomes.

Acknowledgment

- The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Grant Number H263G250007 (Department). They do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department.

Our Objectives Today

- Describe the purpose and scope of the Training Innovation Project (TIP) employer engagement assessments and interviews, as well as the types of input collected from workforce professionals and businesses.
- Summarize key employer engagement training needs and themes identified.
- Apply findings to inform the development of research-based resources, training, and technical assistance for NIDILRR audiences.
- Identify opportunities to align project activities with the employer engagement needs of the workforce system and business partners.

Grant Purpose and Objectives

Grant Purpose

- To build the capacity of vocational rehabilitation professionals and aspiring professionals to serve vocational rehabilitation customers and engage with employers through innovative training and technical assistance.



Training Innovation Project

Employer Engagement Strategies
in Vocational Rehabilitation

Major TIP Objectives and Activities (1)

1. Assess training needs and provide continuous quality improvement.
2. Develop immersive training options using advanced technologies.
3. Showcase a Disability Hiring and Retention Academy model for replication.
4. Develop online micro-credentialed trainings.
5. Support peer learning.
6. Host events for rehabilitation professionals and employers.

Major TIP Objectives and Activities (2)

7. Implement an academic certificate.
8. Establish a website enabled by AI.
9. Nurture partnerships.
10. Convene a national advisory panel.
11. Develop a knowledge translation campaign.
12. Host a National Workforce & Employer Engagement Summit

Provision of Training and Services for Employers— Rehabilitation Services Administration (1)

- Provide training and technical assistance to employers regarding the employment of individuals with disabilities, including disability awareness, and the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and other employment-related laws.
- Work with employers to
 - provide opportunities for work-based learning experiences,
 - provide opportunities for preemployment transition services,
 - recruit qualified applicants with disabilities,
 - train employees with disabilities, and
 - promote awareness of disability-related obstacles to continued employment.

Source: Adapted from 34 CFR 361.32.

Provision of Training and Services for Employers— Rehabilitation Services Administration (2)

- Provide consultation, technical assistance, and support to employers on workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and facilities and workplace access through collaboration with community partners and employers, across states and nationally, to enable the employers to recruit, job match, hire, and retain qualified individuals with disabilities who are recipients of vocational rehabilitation services . . . or who are applicants for such services.
- Assist employers with utilizing available financial support for hiring or accommodating individuals with disabilities.

Source: Adapted from 34 CFR 361.32.

Committed Partners



**National Advisory Panel
- subject matter experts**

Laying the Groundwork

- Key Informant Interviews
- National Employer Engagement Survey
- National Business Needs Assessment Survey

Key Informant Interview Summary

Key Informant Interview Process

- 13 interviews completed between December 2025 and February 2026
- Conducted with professionals across the rehabilitation and workforce fields to gather insights on current practices, collaboration, barriers, challenges, and training needs
- Used a guide we created especially for these interviews that included specific questions based on the individual's role.

Interviews—Rehabilitation Professionals

- Reported working with a wide range of individuals and entities (e.g., direct service providers; indirect support through research, policy, technical assistance, program development)
- Reported varying levels of interactions with employers (e.g., job development, accommodation support, advisory roles, training)
- Identified partnerships as essential for building employer connections, increasing credibility, and expanding employment opportunities

Interviews—Workforce Professionals

- Workforce professionals discussed employer perceptions, collaboration with rehabilitation professionals, disability-related terminology, and engagement with the disability talent pool.
- Employer receptiveness to hiring people with disabilities was mixed but generally seems to improve with education and awareness.
- Collaboration with rehabilitation professionals varied.
- Clear, business-focused language was viewed as essential.

Key Informant Interview Themes

- Relationship-based engagement is essential: Strong relationships improve communication, job matching, and employment outcomes.
- Clear communication improves collaboration: Business-focused language helps align expectations and strengthen partnerships.
- Training is needed across systems: Both rehabilitation professionals and employers require ongoing training to improve engagement and collaboration.
- Collaboration improves outcomes: Strong partnerships increase access to employment opportunities and strengthen workplace participation for people with disabilities.

Training Needs for Rehabilitation Professionals

- Understanding employer needs, workplace expectations, and labor market trends
- Improving communication with employers using business-focused language
- Connecting job seekers with disabilities to employer needs based on strengths, skills, and career goals
- Learning effective employer engagement strategies
- Accessing ongoing professional development and resource sharing

Training Needs for Rehabilitation Employers

- Understanding vocational rehabilitation services and how they support workforce needs
- Addressing misconceptions and concerns about hiring individuals with disabilities
- Learning effective recruitment, accommodation, and retention strategies
- Understanding the business value of hiring people with disabilities

Recommendations From Respondents

- Strengthen relationship-based employer engagement strategies.
- Increase training opportunities for rehabilitation professionals and employers.
- Improve communication using business-focused language.
- Strengthen collaboration across rehabilitation, workforce, and education systems.
- Share success stories and employment outcomes.
- Expand partnerships with employers and business organizations.

National Employer Engagement Survey Summary

Survey Overview

- Improving employer engagement is a key priority for TIP, with a focus on equipping rehabilitation and related professionals with practical knowledge, tools, and strategies to build strong partnerships with employers and businesses.
- A nationwide survey was conducted to gather input from vocational rehabilitation and related professionals to better understand
 - employer engagement training needs,
 - preferred training formats, and
 - organizational capacity to engage with employers.

Survey Distribution and Response Summary

- Disseminated through the TIP email distribution list, National Advisory Panel member networks, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) email list, meetings, presentations, conferences, and word of mouth
- Survey open from February 4, 2026, to March 3, 2026
- 453 responses were received, representing 48 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories

Top Employer Engagement Topics

- Respondents identified the most important employer engagement training needs across three related areas:
 - Overview and Rehabilitation Tools
 - Partnerships and Relationship-Building
 - Resources to Share With Employers
- Respondents could select more than one option and identify additional topics using “Other”

Overview and Rehabilitation Tools

- Participants selected from a list of 19 topics and could choose up to four in this category.

Top Three Topics

- Working with businesses to build career opportunities for employees with disabilities (48%)
- What vocational rehabilitation means for businesses (40%)
- Proven strategies for engaging businesses (33%)

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents ($N = 453$) and do not equal 100% because respondents could select more than one topic.

Techniques to Build Partnerships

- Participants selected from a list of 11 options and could choose up to three in this category.

Top Three Topics

- Building lasting partnerships with businesses (51%)
- Vocational rehabilitation counselors and the provider network as active agents of change in the community (38%)
- Employer consultation strategies that create opportunities (37%)

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents ($N = 453$) and do not equal 100% because respondents could select more than one topic.

Resources to Share With Employers

- Participants selected from a list of 22 topics and could choose up to four in this category.

Top Three Topics

- Myths about hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities (53%)
- Understanding, supporting, and empowering employees with disabilities (37%)
- Proven strategies employers use to recruit, hire, retain, upskill, and advance workers with disabilities (34%)

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents ($N = 453$) and do not equal 100% because respondents could select more than one topic.

How Training Is Currently Provided and Interest in Additional Training

Current Training Formats

- Combination of internal and external trainings: 81%
- Internal training only: 22%
- External training only: 11%

Interest in New Employer Engagement Training

- Yes: 364 respondents
- No: 74 respondents

Reasons for Additional Training

- Strengthening professional skills
- Staying current with changing labor market trends
- Improving effectiveness in working with employers
- Improving job placement outcomes, addressing stigma, and building stronger business relationships
- Increasing confidence
- Learning new strategies
- Better support for clients

Reasons for No Additional Training

- Some respondents do not work directly with employers
- Limited relevance to their roles (e.g., administrative positions or transitioning out of vocational rehabilitation)
- Belief that sufficient training already exists
- Limited time and heavy workloads
- Broader systemic or organizational challenges, rather than individual skills
- Retirement

Incentives for Training

Respondents indicated incentives that would increase participation in additional training, including:

- Credential or badge
- Continuing education credits
- Advancement in career within their organization

Approximately 80% selected “Yes” or “Maybe” for each incentive.

Qualitative feedback indicated that participation is most influenced by the perceived value, relevance, and practical application of the training.

Capacity to Engage With Employers

Respondents assessed their organization's capacity to actively engage with employers.

- Meets expectations: 48%
- Does not have sufficient capacity: 32%
- Exceeds expectations: 20%

Key Takeaways

- Strong demand for training: 83% of respondents are interested in new or expanded employer engagement training
- Practical, employer-centered focus: Emphasis on relationship-building, inclusive hiring, and real-world application
- Flexible delivery needed: Preference for on-demand, virtual, and in-person training options

National Business Needs Assessment Summary

Assessment Overview

- TIP is developing trainings to support businesses and improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities
- A nationwide assessment gathered input on business training and information needs
- Distributed through TIP and National Advisory Panel networks, meetings, presentations, and word of mouth
- Survey open May–June 2026
- 120 responses received

Overview of Participating Businesses

- Responses from 28 states and the District of Columbia
- Representation from a range of business sectors (e.g., health care and social assistance, education services, public administration)
- Businesses of varying sizes, from small organizations to those with more than 500 employees
- Respondents representing a variety of organizational roles, including senior leadership, hiring managers, and human resources professionals

Top Five Topics of Interest

Respondents selected up to five topics of interest from a list of 24 and could also suggest additional topics.

Top Five Topics

- Apprenticeships and internships (28%)
- Disability awareness (25%)
- Reasonable accommodations in the workplace (24%)
- The business case for hiring and retaining qualified people with disabilities (23%)
- Working with neurodivergent employees (23%)

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents ($N = 120$) and do not equal 100% because respondents could select more than one topic.

Vocational Rehabilitation

Employer awareness of and engagement with vocational rehabilitation (VR)

Question	Yes	Maybe	No
Awareness of state VR agency	76%	10%	13%
Use of VR agency services	42%	9%	49%
Awareness of VR services	65%	21%	13%
Hiring of a VR consumer	39%	16%	46%

Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not total exactly 100%.

Key Takeaway: Businesses reported higher awareness of VR agencies and services than use of VR agencies or hiring of VR customers.

Business Knowledge and Accommodation Experience

Respondents were asked about their familiarity with disability employment laws, awareness of job accommodation resources, and experience providing accommodations.

Question	Yes	Maybe	No
Disability employment laws	92%	6%	2%
Job accommodation resources	77%	10%	13%
Providing reasonable accommodations	78%	11%	11%

Note. Because of rounding, percentages may not total exactly 100%.

Training

- Respondents expressed interest in a variety of training formats, including online training modules, live webinars, and conferences.
- Interest in receiving new training on employment and disability: **69%**
- Interest in training incentives:
 - Certificate or badge: **56% Yes**
 - Continuing education credits: **24% Yes, 42% Maybe**

Reasons for Interest in New Training

- Staying current with changing laws, regulations, and practices
- Expanding knowledge and understanding of disability employment
- Better able to support people with disabilities
- Job-related responsibilities
- Interest in improving workplace practices, leadership buy-in, compliance, hiring, and business outcomes
- Strengthen disability-inclusive workplaces

Reasons for Limited Interest in New Training

- Already knowledgeable, experienced, or have internal human resources (HR)/legal supports
- Not relevant to their role
- Lack of time
- Competing priorities
- Current practices are sufficient and there is no immediate need

What Businesses Told Us They Need

Businesses emphasized that successful vocational rehabilitation partnerships require

- understanding of business operations, job requirements, and workplace culture;
- consistent communication, outreach, and follow-up;
- candidates who are prepared and appropriately matched to available positions;
- individualized accommodations and ongoing support; and
- collaborative, flexible partners focused on long-term success.

TIP Response

TIP Training Mechanism

Explore → Apply → Develop → Advance

TIP's professional development strategy creates a connected learning pathway that allows participants to enter at multiple points to build their knowledge from awareness to application, competency development, and advanced practice.

Trainings (1)

- **Professional Learning Series** self-paced courses will be housed in the TIP training hub with options to earn micro-credentials and continuing education units.
 - Uses strategies that allow for immediate on-the-job application
- **Communities of Practice** provide opportunities for people to work together to share ideas, solve problems, and strengthen employment.

Trainings (2)

- **Learn at Lunch** sessions allow participants to increase knowledge, learn about practical tools, and connect with others.
 - Sessions will run 30–45 minutes and allow time for questions in a relaxed space.
 - Sessions will include a guest speaker, TIP team member, and/or a hands-on activity.

Trainings (3)

- **Disability Hiring and Retention Academy** provides practical tools to help connect people to meaningful careers.
- **Academic Certificate** in workforce engagement at the University of Kentucky
- **Workforce & Employer Engagement Summit**

Building a Business Engagement Approach

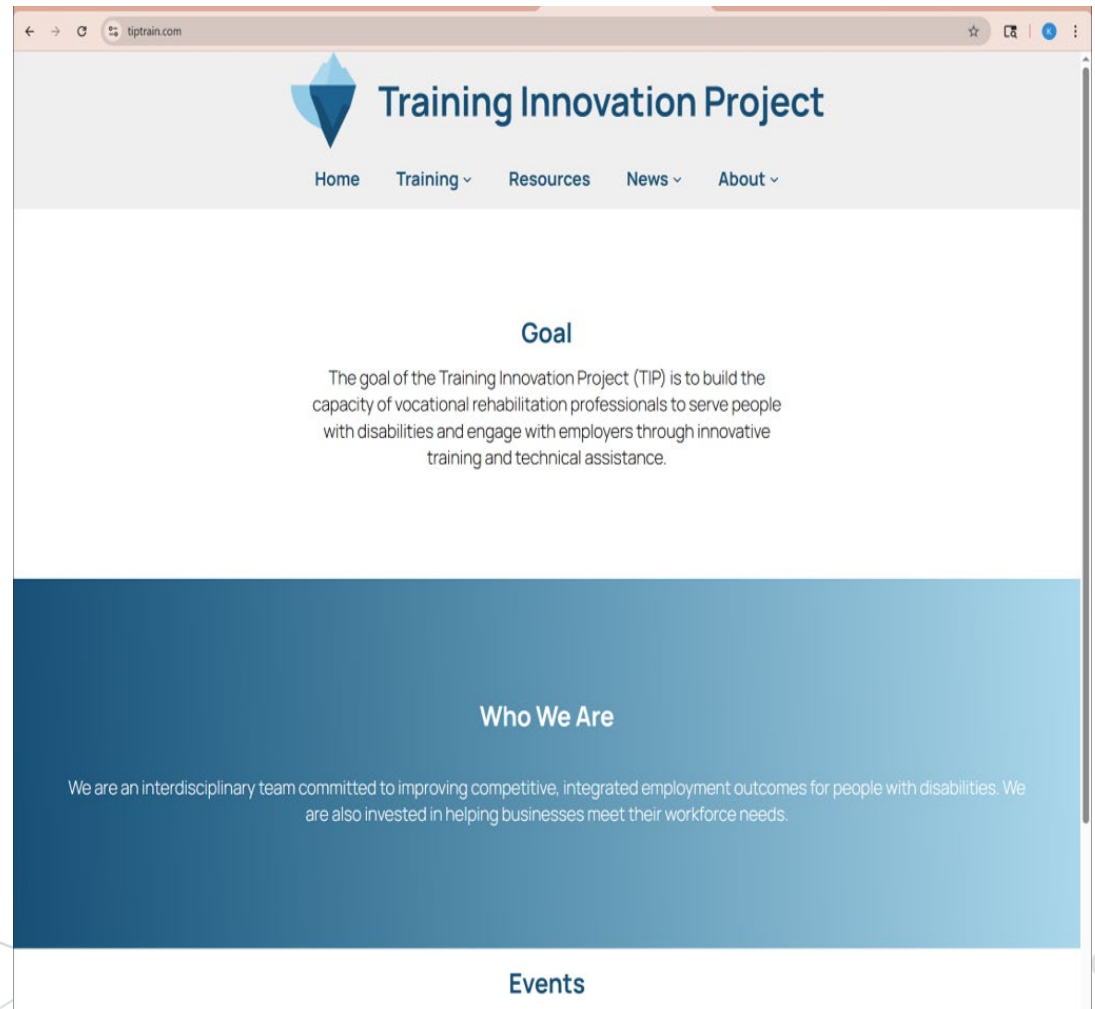
- Think like an employer
- Employer discovery
- Speaking “business”
- Connect talent to business needs
- Hiring in practice
- Supporting success
- Building the partnership
- Measure what matters

Critical Elements of the Approach

1. Add real-world components; embrace advanced technologies
2. Use multiple methods to convey content
3. Share common language
4. Include business in the training
5. Think replication
6. Useful and usable tools
7. Sustainability
8. Partnership principles must be foundational

TIP Innovative Training Hub

tiptrain.com



Workforce & Employer Engagement Summit



Workforce & Employer Engagement Summit

Virtual Event
September 22, 2026
1:00 pm - 4:00 pm ET

Join workforce partners, businesses, and vocational rehabilitation professionals to explore practical approaches that strengthen employer partnerships. You'll learn:

- ✓ Employer engagement strategies
- ✓ Lessons learned from the field
- ✓ Tools you can use right away
- ✓ Resources to support your work



Learn. Connect. Collaborate.

Reserve Your Spot



Scan to Register

Thank you!



Training Innovation Project

Employer Engagement Strategies
in Vocational Rehabilitation

Tiptraining@uky.edu

Thank you!

Any questions? Comments?

What did you think? Please share your feedback and fill out this brief evaluation:

Scan to take the survey



KTER Event Feedback Survey

<https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/8969264/KTER-09-16-26-Employer-Needs>

 kter@air.org

 kter.org

The contents of this presentation were developed under grant number 90DPEM0011 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this presentation do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.