

From Barriers to Opportunity: Employer Perspectives on Inclusive Employment in Nebraska



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Table of Contents

Introduction and Approach.....	1
Employer Survey	2
Methods	2
Respondent Characteristics.....	2
Results	4
Employment of Individuals with a Developmental Disability: Historic and Current.....	4
Experiences Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability	6
Benefits of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability	7
Challenges of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability.....	9
Resources and Training to Support Hiring and Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability	12
Interviews.....	17
Methods	17
Results	17
Strengths.....	17
Challenges.....	21
Reflections: What I Wish I Knew	24
Support Needs for Employers.....	26
Outreach and Awareness	28
Planning Group Review and Input	29
Key Themes	29
Discussion and Next Steps	30
Recommended Next Steps.....	32
Conclusion	33
Appendix A – Employer Survey.....	34
Appendix B – Interview Questions.....	38

Introduction and Approach

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (NUPPC) partnered with the Nebraska Council on Development Disabilities (NCDD) to assess employer awareness of and opinions related to employing persons living with developmental disabilities. This information will help NCDD develop an awareness campaign that is responsive to the needs, concerns, and awareness levels expressed by employers.

Gathering information from employers and NCDD partner organizations followed an intentional and deliberate approach to data collection. A planning group was formed for this project, and NUPPC worked closely with the NCDD planning group members and NCDD staff to develop methods and materials to gather input regarding employing individuals living with disabilities. The process included several key components.

To begin the process, NUPPC, in collaboration with NCDD personnel, formed the planning group by gathering a list of key partners providing services and supports for individuals with developmental disabilities throughout the state of Nebraska. The planning group provided expertise regarding the methods to gather input, development of data collection instruments, and identification of appropriate participants. Ultimately, the planning group sessions informed the development of both an employer survey and a focus group/interview protocol. Results of these instruments were discussed with the group. Please see Table 1 for a list of planning group dates and topics discussed.

Table 1: Planning Group Meeting Schedule

Date	Platform	Topic(s)
April 7, 2025	Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review project and planning group goals - Review planning group members, discuss who may be missing - Discuss employer survey topics and questions - Discuss strategies to engage employers
May 14, 2025	Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review project activities and timeline - Discuss employer survey topics and questions - Identify resources for survey disbursement, contact lists, etc.
May 22, 2025 (optional)	Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discuss and finalize employer survey topics and questions
August 18, 2025	Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review project activities and timeline - Discuss employer survey results - Discuss focus group topics and questions - Discuss strategies to engage focus group participants
November 17, 2025	Zoom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present survey and focus group findings - Discuss findings

A mixed methods approach was used to assess employer awareness and opinions as they related to employing persons living with developmental disabilities. The survey featured primarily quantitative questions to capture data from a variety of employers across Nebraska. Focus groups and interviews using qualitative methods provided the opportunity for more detailed conversations with partners to expand on information captured via the survey. However, both the survey and the semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions. Several key themes emerged via the analysis of the

qualitative and quantitative data. Because the survey was collected, discussed, and used to inform development of the interview/focus group questions, below you will find information about the survey presented first, followed by information about the interviews/focus groups.

Employer Survey

The NUPPC, with the assistance of the NCDD planning group, developed the employer survey via a series of planning group sessions already detailed in Table 1. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A. The survey was developed to evaluate Nebraska employers' experiences with hiring and employing individuals with developmental disabilities. It aimed to identify the perceived benefits and challenges associated with such employment, as well as the factors that could enhance employers' confidence in hiring and supporting these individuals.

Methods

NUPPC utilized a mixed sampling methodology that combined snowball sampling with purposive sampling. This approach was chosen to ensure a broad range of participants while maintaining relevance to the study objectives. NUPPC started by identifying and reaching out to key employers within relevant fields who were well-positioned to provide insight and connect NUPPC with others in their networks. These individuals served as the initial seeds in a snowball sampling process, allowing NUPPC to expand the sample through their referrals to other knowledgeable and engaged employers.

Once the initial network was established, NUPPC transitioned to a more structured approach using purposive sampling. Potential employers were selected intentionally to ensure representation across a range of sectors. Within each sector, a variety of organizations were chosen by size (e.g., small, medium, and large entities) and geographic location (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural areas). This strategy was intended to capture a range of experiences and perspectives that reflect the complexity of the broader network of Nebraska employers. NUPPC monitored the surveys being received and targeted sectors and locations that appeared underrepresented in our sample with automated follow-up survey distributions via Qualtrics® survey software.

The survey was first launched on June 27, 2025, and was closed on August 18, 2025. Individuals included in the purposive sampling list were sent the initial survey invitation on either July 16 or July 17, 2025. Those who did not complete the survey were sent a reminder email on either July 22 or July 23, 2025. Those in the snowball sampling list could be sent the link at any time during the survey window.

Respondent Characteristics

A total of 66 people responded to the survey. Survey respondents were asked which of the following best described their workplace. Responses were split relatively evenly across non-profit or nongovernmental organizations, private sector, and public sector. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2: Workplace Sector ($n = 66$)

Workplace Sector	<i>n</i>	%
Non-profit or nongovernmental organization	22	33.3
Private sector	25	37.9
Public sector (government or government-funded)	19	28.8

Respondents were also asked to identify which industry they represented. Categories were not mutually exclusive, meaning a respondent could select more than one category. The healthcare and social assistance industry was heavily represented in the sample ($n = 24$, 36.4%). Responses in the “Other” category included agriculture, arts, environment and natural resources, logistics and utilities, media and entertainment, service provider, transportation, and wholesale distribution. See Table 3 for additional detail.

Table 3: Type of Industry ($n = 66$)

Type of Industry	<i>n</i>	%
Healthcare & Social Assistance	24	36.4
Faith-Based & Philanthropy	9	13.6
Hospitality	9	13.6
Nonprofit	9	13.6
Tourism & Food Services	9	13.6
Manufacturing & Engineering	7	10.6
Government & Public Administration	5	7.6
Construction & Skilled Trades	3	4.5
Education & Training	3	4.5
Advertising & Communications	2	3.0
Finance	2	3.0
Information Technology & Software	2	3.0
Insurance & Real Estate	2	3.0
Law Enforcement	2	3.0%
Legal & Professional Services	2	3.0
Marketing	2	3.0
Other	8	12.1

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Most of the respondents’ employers had headquarters in Nebraska ($n = 58$, 87.9%; Table 4). Of employers with headquarters in Nebraska, many were from either Lincoln ($n = 28$, 48.3%) or Omaha ($n = 11$, 19.0%). See Table 5 for additional detail.

Table 4: General Headquarters Location ($n = 66$)

Headquarters Location	<i>n</i>	%
Nebraska	58	87.9
United States, not Nebraska	4	6.1
International	2	3.0
Unknown	2	3.0

Table 5: Nebraska Headquarters Location ($n = 58$)

Headquarters Location (if within Nebraska)	n	%
Lincoln, NE	28	48.3
Omaha NE	11	19.0
Scottsbluff, NE	4	6.9
Kearney NE	3	5.2
Grand Island, NE	2	3.4
Beatrice, NE	1	1.7
Bellevue, NE	1	1.7
Brainard, NE	1	1.7
Dakota City, NE	1	1.7
Exeter, NE	1	1.7
Hemingford, NE	1	1.7
McCook, NE	1	1.7
North Platte, NE	1	1.7
Ogallala NE	1	1.7
Sidney, NE	1	1.7

The final question assessing employer characteristics was the approximate number of employees in a company. Respondents tended to select employer sizes of either 11 to 50 employees ($n = 20, 30.8\%$) or 501+ employees ($n = 17, 26.2\%$). Overall, there was a good mix of employer size included in the sample. See Table 6 for details.

Table 6: Organization Size ($n = 66$)

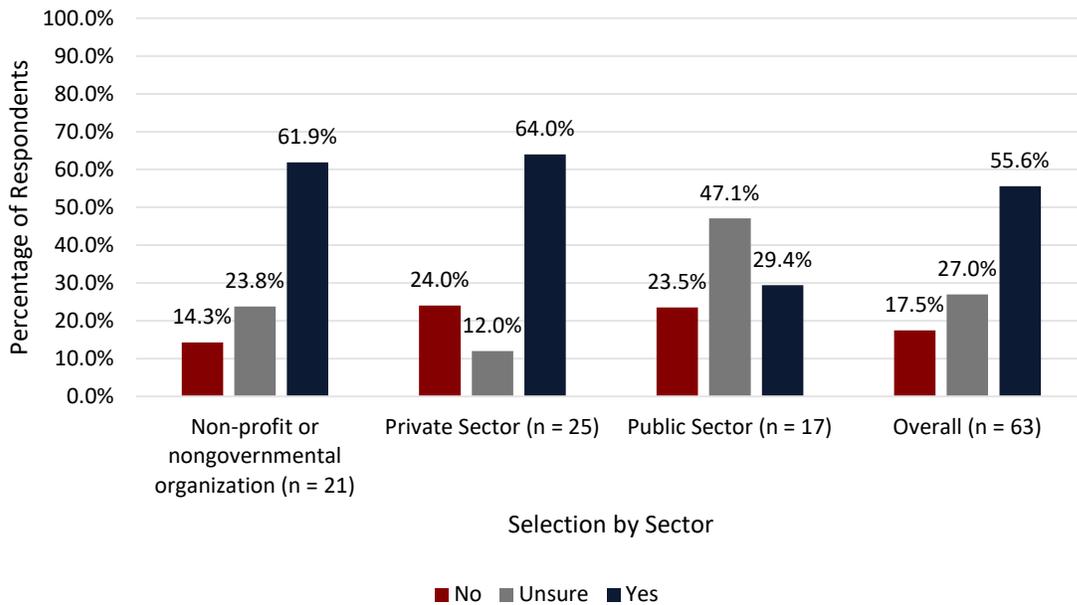
Organization Size	n	%
1-10	11	16.9
11-50	20	30.8
51-100	12	18.5
101-500	5	7.7
501+	17	26.2

Results

Employment of Individuals with a Developmental Disability: Historic and Current

Respondents were asked whether their employer has ever employed or currently employs an individual with a developmental disability. Some variability was observed across sectors. Respondents representing the private sector ($n = 16, 64.0\%$) or a non-profit or nongovernmental organization ($n = 13, 61.9\%$) were most likely to report that their employer had ever employed an individual with a developmental disability (Figure 1).

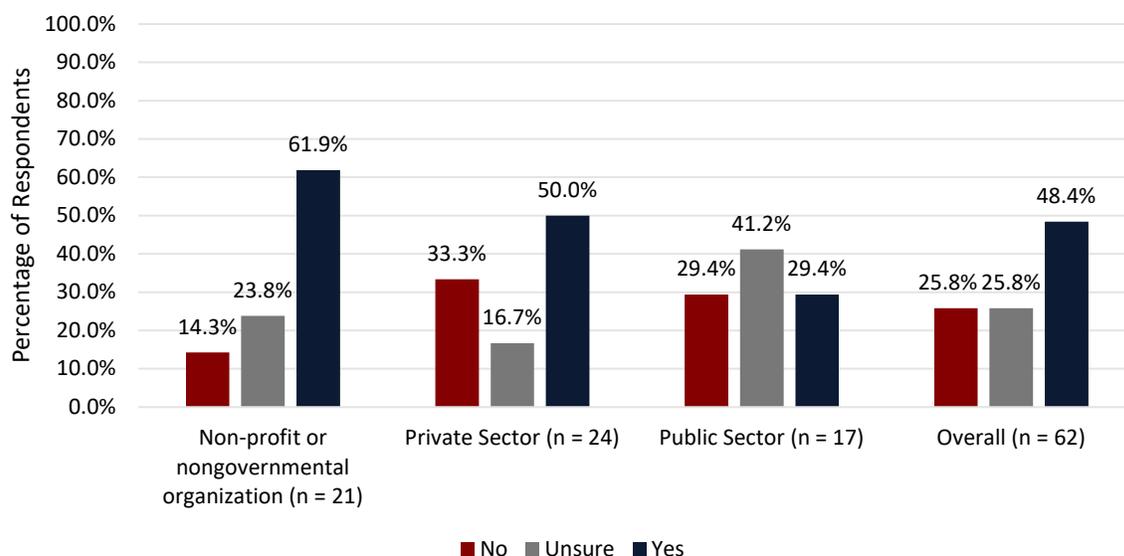
Figure 1: Percentage of Employers Who Had Ever Employed Anyone with a Developmental Disability



Respondents representing the nonprofit or nongovernmental organization sector were most likely to indicate that their employer currently employs at least one individual with a developmental disability ($n = 13$, 61.9%), a proportion that remained consistent with those who reported their employer had ever employed an individual with a developmental disability (Figure 2). However, the percentage of private sector employers reporting they currently employ at least one individual with a developmental disability was lower ($n = 12$, 50.0%). Additionally, one-third of private sector respondents said their employer *did not currently* employ anyone with a developmental disability ($n = 8$, 33.3%), an increase from the 24.0% ($n = 8$) of private sector respondents who indicated their employer *had never* employed anyone with a developmental disability. This shows a decreasing employment trend of individuals with disability among private sector survey respondents.

Nearly half of respondents from the public sector were unsure whether their employer had ever employed anyone with a developmental disability ($n = 8$, 47.1%). This percentage was slightly lower, though still relatively high, when asked whether their employer currently employs anyone with a developmental disability ($n = 7$, 41.2%). These findings suggest that public sector respondents may have been less familiar with their agency's personnel compared to respondents from the private and nonprofit or nongovernmental organization sectors. See Figure 1 and Figure 2 for additional detail.

Figure 2: Percentage of Employers Who Currently Employ Anyone With a Developmental Disability



Experiences Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability

Respondents who indicated that their employer either currently employs or has previously employed an individual with a developmental disability were asked to reflect on their experiences working with these individuals. Overall, respondents shared favorable experiences, noting that employees with developmental disabilities have been valuable assets to their workplaces, demonstrating dedication and loyalty. Respondents further described these employees as reliable and enthusiastic contributors who have positively influenced team morale and helped fill important gaps within their organizations.

Hiring individuals with developmental disabilities offers numerous valuable benefits to the workplace. These employees are often highly reliable and bring genuine enthusiasm to their roles each day, which can positively influence over all team morale.

It has been very positive and has filled a valuable gap in our workforce.

One respondent emphasized the importance of shifting the focus from a person’s disability to recognizing their distinct abilities and talents. Across all workplaces, all individuals bring different strengths, and employees with developmental disabilities are no exception. Respondents noted that when provided with appropriate support and a supportive environment, these employees perform the responsibilities of their positions. Using a strengths-based approach not only enhances individual performance, but also contributes to a more dynamic and effective workplace culture where all employees can thrive.

In my experience, I’ve found that individuals with developmental disabilities bring the same value and dedication as any other team member. I haven’t noticed a significant difference in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the workplace. With the right support and inclusive environment, they perform their roles reliably and often bring a unique perspective and strong

work ethic. I appreciate their contributions and view them as an integral part of a diverse, effective team.

All the people we have working here have some form of disability. I really hate the word disability. We find that once we discover the person's abilities, we can harness those talents to propel the growth of our company. A true win-win.

While most respondents shared positive experiences, some noted that finding the right fit between the individual and the position was critical to success. A few respondents described situations in which employees with developmental disabilities experienced challenges with productivity or understanding instructions, underscoring the importance of matching job responsibilities to each person's abilities and support needs. Ensuring that roles are clearly defined and that appropriate training and guidance are provided can help both the employee and the organization succeed.

Generally good employees. Good attendance. Occasional difficulties with productivity and understanding instructions.

They tend to need additional support, and direction which makes these individuals more difficult to employ.

Overall, respondents emphasized that with reasonable accommodations and the right supports in place, employees with developmental disabilities can thrive and make lasting contributions to their workplaces. Many noted that once given the opportunity to learn and adapt to their roles, these employees often become some of the most dependable and dedicated members of the team. Respondents described them as hardworking, loyal, and enthusiastic individuals who enhance workplace culture and strengthen team morale. Their collective experiences highlight that inclusive hiring practices not only create meaningful opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities but also benefit organizations through greater stability, engagement, and diversity.

Good, it takes a bit longer to train them, but they are the most loyal, dedicated and happy employees to work with.

Benefits of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability

All respondents were asked the following question, "Based on your understanding or experience, which of the following do you believe could be potential benefits of employing individuals with developmental disabilities". Respondents were provided with a list of options and were able to select as many options as they believed were appropriate. The highest percentage of respondents indicated that *strengthened organizational values and social responsibility* was a benefit of employing an individual with a developmental disability ($n = 40, 72.7\%$). Only a small number of respondents indicated *tax credits or financial incentives* could be potential benefits of employing individuals with developmental disabilities ($n = 8, 14.5\%$). See Table 7 for details.

Table 7: Benefits of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability ($n = 55$)

Benefit	n	%
Strengthened organizational values and social responsibility	40	72.7
Improved workplace diversity	38	69.1
Positive public image and community engagement	36	65.5
Enhanced team morale and workplace culture	32	58.2
Access to job coaching or training support programs	25	45.5
Addressing staffing needs across various positions in the organization	25	45.5
Reliable and consistent work performance	25	45.5
Increased employee loyalty and retention	24	43.6
Broader customer appeal through hiring practices	13	23.6
Tax credits or financial incentives	8	14.5

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

When perceived potential benefits of employing individuals with developmental disabilities are explored by sector, some key similarities and differences emerge. First, the top two overall benefits (*strengthened organizational values and social responsibility* and *improved workplace diversity*) were among the top three potential benefits identified for all three sectors (Table 8). For the nonprofit or nongovernmental sector, these were the top two potential benefits, respectively. Private sector respondents noted *enhanced team morale and workplace culture* as a top potential benefit ($n = 12, 57.1\%$). A high percentage of respondents representing the public sector ($n = 13, 92.9\%$) and the nonprofit or nongovernmental sector ($n = 15, 75.0\%$) tended to identify *positive public image and community engagement* as a potential benefit of employing individuals with a developmental disability, which was a notable difference from respondents representing the private sector ($n = 8, 38.1\%$). See Table 8 for additional details.

Table 8: Benefits of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability by Sector

Benefit	Nonprofit or nongovernmental Sector (n = 20)		Private Sector (n = 21)		Public Sector (n = 14)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
	Strengthened organizational values and social responsibility	18	90.0	12	57.1	10
Improved workplace diversity	16	80.0	11	52.4	11	78.6
Positive public image and community engagement	15	75.0	8	38.1	13	92.9
Enhanced team morale and workplace culture	12	60.0	12	57.1	8	57.1
Access to job coaching or training support programs	11	55.0	7	33.3	7	50.0
Addressing staffing needs across various positions in the organization	11	55.0	7	33.3	7	50.0
Reliable and consistent work performance	8	40.0	10	47.6	7	50.0
Increased employee loyalty and retention	10	50.0	9	42.9	5	35.7
Broader customer appeal through hiring practices	6	30.0	3	14.3	4	28.6
Tax credits or financial incentives	3	15.0	4	19.0	1	7.1

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Top three selections within each sector are displayed with green text.

Challenges of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability

Respondents were asked about potential challenges in hiring employees with developmental disabilities and provided a list of options, with space to write in something else. Over half of the respondents identified three potential challenges. First was *supervisors lacking experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities* (n = 30, 55.6%). This was followed by a tie between *concerns about productivity or task performance* and *difficulty matching job roles to individual strengths* (n = 28, 51.9%). See Table 9 for additional detail.

Table 9: Challenges of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability ($n = 54$)

Challenge	n	%
Supervisors lacking experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities	30	55.6
Concerns about productivity or task performance	28	51.9
Difficulty matching job roles to individual strengths	28	51.9
Transportation challenges affecting reliable workplace attendance	27	50.0
Lack of awareness about available support programs	24	44.4
Concern about individuals' potential loss or impact on public benefits like Social Security disability benefits, Medicaid, SNAP, housing, etc.	23	42.6
Need for additional training or job coaching	23	42.6
Concerns about workplace safety or liability	22	40.7
Uncertainty about how to provide accommodations	22	40.7
Limited internal resources to support inclusion efforts	18	33.3
Misunderstandings or stigma among staff or customers	16	29.6
Lack of qualified candidates	15	27.8
Legal or regulatory concerns	10	18.5
Unclear policies or procedures for inclusive hiring	8	14.8
Other (please specify)	0	0.0

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Supervisors lacking experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities was the most frequently identified potential challenge among respondents of both nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations ($n = 12$, 63.2%) and the private sector ($n = 13$, 61.9%). The most frequently identified potential challenge for the public sector was *difficulty matching job roles to individual strengths* ($n = 8$, 57.1%), which was also tied for the most frequently identified potential challenge for nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations ($n = 12$, 63.2%). Nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations also frequently identified a *lack of awareness about available support programs* ($n = 11$, 57.9%) as a potential challenge. *Concerns about individual's potential loss of benefits* was among the top three potential challenges noted among public sector representatives ($n = 6$, 42.9%), tied with *concerns about productivity or task performance* for this sector. The lack of awareness about support programs and concerns about potential loss of benefits demonstrate potential opportunities to inform these sectors of additional information and available opportunities. See Table 10 for additional detail.

Table 10: Challenges of Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability by Sector

Challenge	<i>Nonprofit or nongovernmental Sector (n = 19)</i>		<i>Private Sector (n = 21)</i>		<i>Public Sector (n = 14)</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
	Supervisors lacking experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities	12	63.2	13	61.9	5
Concerns about productivity or task performance	10	52.6	12	57.1	6	42.9
Difficulty matching job roles to individual strengths	12	63.2	8	38.1	8	57.1
Transportation challenges affecting reliable workplace attendance	9	47.4	11	52.4	7	50.0
Lack of awareness about available support programs	11	57.9	8	38.1	5	35.7
Concern about individuals' potential loss or impact on public benefits like Social Security disability benefits, Medicaid, SNAP, housing, etc.	7	36.8	10	47.6	6	42.9
Need for additional training or job coaching	10	52.6	9	42.9	4	28.6
Concerns about workplace safety or liability	9	47.4	10	47.6	3	21.4
Uncertainty about how to provide accommodations	7	36.8	9	42.9	6	42.9
Limited internal resources to support inclusion efforts	7	36.8	9	42.9	2	14.3
Misunderstandings or stigma among staff or customers	9	47.4	3	14.3	4	28.6
Lack of qualified candidates	4	21.1	8	38.1	3	21.4
Legal or regulatory concerns	4	21.1	5	23.8	1	7.1
Unclear policies or procedures for inclusive hiring	3	15.8	3	14.3	2	14.3

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Top three (with ties allowed) selections within each sector are displayed with green text.

Resources and Training to Support Hiring and Employing Individuals with a Developmental Disability

Respondents were asked what their business would need to make them more comfortable hiring and retaining individuals with developmental disabilities. They were provided a list of response options and invited to select all applicable options. Three quarters of all respondents indicated that *access to job coaches or employment specialists* ($n = 33, 75.0\%$) was a resource or support of value. The second most selected resource or support was *access to reliable transportation for employees* ($n = 29, 65.9\%$). One person selected “Other” and specified, “Identifying positions we could add in our organization that match skill set and enhance our services” as the support that would be of value. See Table 11 for details.

Table 11: Resources/Supports for Employers in Hiring Individuals with a Developmental Disability ($n = 44$)

Resource or Support	<i>n</i>	%
Access to job coaches or employment specialists	33	75.0
Access to reliable transportation for employees	29	65.9
Access to a pool of qualified candidates	26	59.1
Training for supervisors and staff on inclusion and disability awareness	26	59.1
Ongoing consultation or technical assistance	24	54.5
Partnerships with local disability employment organizations	24	54.5
Mentorship or peer support from other inclusive employers	23	52.3
Guidance on how to provide reasonable accommodations	22	50.0
Assistance with onboarding and role matching	20	45.5
Funding or incentives to support inclusive hiring	20	45.5
Success stories or case studies from other employers	16	36.4
Access to disability and public benefits consultation	15	34.1
Legal guidance on hiring people with disabilities	14	31.8
Clear policies and procedures for inclusive hiring	11	25.0
Information on tax incentives or financial assistance	11	25.0
Other (please specify)	1	2.2

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

When these resources were examined by sector, several key similarities and differences were once again identified. *Access to job coaches or employment specialists* was among the top three most commonly identified resources or supports across all sectors. *Access to reliable transportation for employees* was frequently identified by both the private ($n = 14, 73.7\%$) and public sectors ($n = 7, 77.8\%$). *Access to a pool of qualified candidates* was indicated more by respondents from nonprofit or non-governmental organizations ($n = 11, 68.8\%$) and the private sector ($n = 13, 68.4\%$), especially compared to those representing the public sector ($n = 2, 22.2\%$). Two-thirds of public sector representatives indicated that *success stories or case studies from other employers* (66.7%) would be a valuable resource to help employer comfort in hiring individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The differences in the desired resources and supports that would increase employer comfort by sector warrant further examination to identify targeted methods for marketing and information delivery, as it is clear that needs and priorities vary considerably across sectors. See Table 12 for details.

Table 12: Resources/Supports for Employers in Hiring Individuals with a Developmental Disability by Sector

Resource or Support	Nonprofit or nongovernmental Sector (n = 16)		Private Sector (n = 19)		Public Sector (n = 9)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Access to job coaches or employment specialists	13	81.3	15	78.9	5	55.6
Access to reliable transportation for employees	8	50.0	14	73.7	7	77.8
Access to a pool of qualified candidates	11	68.8	13	68.4	2	22.2
Training for supervisors and staff on inclusion and disability awareness	10	62.5	11	57.9	5	55.6
Ongoing consultation or technical assistance	9	56.3	11	57.9	4	44.4
Partnerships with local disability employment organizations	9	56.3	11	57.9	4	44.4
Mentorship or peer support from other inclusive employers	9	56.3	10	52.6	4	44.4
Guidance on how to provide reasonable accommodations	8	50.0	9	47.4	5	55.6
Assistance with onboarding and role matching	8	50.0	8	42.1	4	44.4
Funding or incentives to support inclusive hiring	7	43.8	8	42.1	5	55.6
Success stories or case studies from other employers	4	25.0	6	31.6	6	66.7
Access to disability and public benefits consultation	5	31.3	8	42.1	2	22.2
Legal guidance on hiring people with disabilities	4	25.0	7	36.8	3	33.3
Clear policies and procedures for inclusive hiring	2	12.5	6	31.6	3	33.3
Information on tax incentives or financial assistance	4	25.0	6	31.6	1	11.1
Other (please specify)	1	6.3	0	0.0	0	0.0

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Top three (with ties allowed) selections within each sector are displayed with green text.

Respondents were given an open-ended opportunity to share additional information about what their business would need to increase confidence in hiring and retaining individuals with developmental

disabilities. Several respondents noted that they already employ individuals with developmental disabilities and feel confident in their ability to continue hiring and retaining them.

I feel we are well suited currently and do not need to increase confidence.

A few key themes emerged, some of which were consistent with the potential challenges and identified resources and supports mentioned previously. A central theme was the need for additional information, awareness, and training. This requested information included increased general awareness of individuals with developmental disabilities within communities.

More awareness of people in the DD community and understanding that like all people they, too, will have strengths and weaknesses.

Foundational knowledge, including defining developmental disability, and understanding laws pertaining to reasonable accommodation, were noted as needed by some of the respondents.

Understand laws and developmental disabilities.

Definition of developmental disabilities; is this something the applicant shares during the hiring process?

Beyond foundational knowledge and awareness, respondents noted a need for training for hiring managers and supervisors. Ideally, this training would connect participants to resources that help support employees with developmental disabilities in achieving their potential through supportive employment or other appropriate means. Additionally, providing information on available partnerships and contacts for businesses to reach out to when support is needed could further increase confidence in hiring and retaining individuals with developmental disabilities.

More training and awareness opportunities for our hiring managers across our departments who are making hiring decisions.

Any business would benefit from additional training for managers and staff on inclusive workplace practices, clear guidance on reasonable accommodations, funding for staff training program enhancements, and access to external resources or partnerships that provide support and expertise in working with individuals with developmental disabilities.

The survey continued to assess interest in participating in programs to integrate employees with developmental disabilities into the respondent's workplace. Respondents tended to either indicate that they would be willing to do this ($n = 15$, 31.9%) or may be willing to do this if there are clear benefits and support ($n = 18$, 38.3%). This indicates a high level of overall willingness to participate in such a program. The private sector had the highest percentage of no responses to this question ($n = 8$, 42.1%), with a slightly higher level of interest among the public and nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. See Table 13 for details.

Table 13: Employer Interest in Participating in Programs to Integrate Employees with Developmental Disabilities by Sector

Response category	<i>n</i>	%
Private sector (<i>n</i> = 19)		
Yes, definitely	6	31.6
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	5	26.3
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	8	42.1
Public sector (<i>n</i> = 11)		
Yes, definitely	4	36.4
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	4	36.4
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	3	27.3
Nongovernmental/nonprofit sector (<i>n</i> = 17)		
Yes, definitely	5	29.4
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	9	52.9
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	3	17.6

The next question assessed whether respondents would be interested in attending a training on best practices for hiring and supporting employees with developmental disabilities. About one quarter of the respondents indicated they *would definitely* be interested in this type of training (*n* = 13, 27.7%). The highest percentage of respondents indicated they *may be* interested in the training if there are clear benefits and support (*n* = 25, 53.2%). Respondents were asked what might increase their interest in such training, and generally they stated that limited time and personnel budgets are barriers. Additionally, a lack of understanding of what a developmental disability is was noted by one respondent. Table 14 shows details on employer interest in trainings by sector.

Table 14: Employer Interest in Training on Best Practices for Hiring and Supporting Employees with Developmental Disabilities

Response category	<i>n</i>	%
Private sector (<i>n</i> = 19)		
Yes, definitely	6	31.6
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	7	36.8
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	6	31.6
Public sector (<i>n</i> = 11)		
Yes, definitely	2	18.2
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	7	63.2
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	2	18.2
Nongovernmental/nonprofit sector (<i>n</i> = 17)		
Yes, definitely	5	29.4
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	11	64.7
No, I don't think it's feasible for my business	1	5.9

The next question inquired about respondent’s interest in participating in a mentorship program with other employers who have successfully hired employees with developmental disabilities. Only four respondents (8.9%) indicated they would be interested in this. About half of respondents indicated it would depend on the time commitment ($n = 25$, 55.6%). Respondents from nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations showed a slightly higher willingness to participate, with only three of these respondents selecting “no” (18.8%). See Table 15 for details.

Table 15: Employer Interest in Participating in a Mentorship Program on Hiring Employees with Developmental Disabilities

Response category	<i>n</i>	%
Private sector (<i>n</i> = 18)		
Yes, definitely	1	5.6
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	9	50.0
No, I don’t think it’s feasible for my business	8	44.4
Public sector (<i>n</i> = 11)		
Yes, definitely	1	9.1
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	5	45.5
No, I don’t think it’s feasible for my business	5	45.5
Nongovernmental/nonprofit sector (<i>n</i> = 16)		
Yes, definitely	2	12.5
Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support	11	68.8
No, I don’t think it’s feasible for my business	3	18.8

The preferred methods for receiving information about hiring individuals with developmental disabilities were online webinars or workshops ($n = 23$, 59.0%) and informational guides or toolkits ($n = 22$, 56.4%). Other listed methods were each selected by over 30% of respondents, indicating that they may also provide value. See Table 16 for details.

Table 16: Preferred Methods for Receiving Information About Hiring Individuals with Developmental Disabilities ($n = 39$)

Preferred method	<i>n</i>	%
Online webinars or workshops	23	59.0
Informational guides or toolkits	22	56.4
Direct consultations with experts	18	46.2
In-person training sessions	16	41.0
Success stories and case studies	12	30.8

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, and percentages may add to more than 100%.

Interviews

Methods

The NUPPC team conducted virtual interviews with employers, educational service providers, employees, and parent advocates with employment expertise. The interview questions were developed to expand on information learned from the employer survey, specifically to gain more insight into experiences hiring and employing individuals with IDD. A copy of the interview questions is available in Appendix B. The team contacted 22 people via phone or email and invited them to participate in the interviews, with 7 people contributing. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Consent to record the interviews for note-taking purposes was obtained.

Once completed, researchers uploaded the audio files to an online transcription service. Transcripts were coded based on the interview domains (Strengths, Challenges, Reflections, Support Needs for Employers, and Outreach and Awareness), and themes emerged.

Results

Strengths

Interview participants identified numerous strengths among employees with developmental disabilities. These strengths clustered around workplace essentials such as attendance, reliability, and task completion, as well as less tangible but just as important contributions to workplace culture and building community connections. While some strengths aligned with employer expectations, others came as surprises, challenging preconceptions about the capabilities of individuals with developmental disabilities and their impact on the workplace and broader community. Additional strengths are reflected in the following section on deciding factors.

Deciding Factors in Hiring People with Disabilities

When asked about deciding factors in hiring individuals with developmental disabilities, informants revealed motivations ranging from mission-driven business models, to recognizing untapped talent pools. One employer designed their entire business to provide employment opportunities for individuals with IDD. Another employer described individuals with developmental disabilities as "an untapped talent pool that people are not knowing that they need to access." Another informant simply stated, "They were the best candidate for the job."

Attendance and Reliability

Attendance emerged as the most frequently mentioned strength. One employer stated, "Loyalty and accountability. They always show up for work. Unless they're dying or have some kind of significant illness, they are here."

An employee with a disability reinforced this finding by saying, "I always like to show up on time and I never like to miss a day of work. I just want to show up and be there and just get my normal pay every week."

A parent advocate, who also participated in the interview, elaborated on the traits employers can expect:

He's very friendly. He loves to meet new people, and he's very courteous and polite. He's punctual. He has reliable transportation. He's a rule follower, so he's not going to be in the bathroom messing with his phone. He doesn't call in hungover, let's put it that way. I mean, he wants to work.

This commitment was seen as positively influencing other staff or team members as an employer told us:

It also changes the culture and climate of my staff because then my staff without disabilities knows that they need to be at work to support my employees that do have disabilities because they know how difficult it is for a change in routine sometimes or to have them not be there and that's their person that they ask the questions to. So, my staff without disabilities show up to work.

Reliability extended beyond task completion to include broader workplace responsibilities. Employers stressed that once expectations were clearly established and learned, employees with developmental disabilities maintained those standards

Consistency and Performance

Once employees with IDD learned their assigned tasks, they demonstrated reliability and adherence to those procedures. This consistency proved valuable in positions requiring attention to detail. As one employer explained:

Once they learn it, they've got it. Now, there are some employees that I've shown them 972 times how to do the same thing and we're not there yet, but their strengths aren't necessarily for that position. It might be more of that social component going out to the customers, interacting, et cetera. But for most of them, once they've gone through the training on how to do something, they've got it. They don't deviate from it. They don't try to make up their own rules or change anything at all.

This was contrasted with experiences with other employees, as the same employer noted. "Some of my employees without disabilities will be like, 'Well, what if we made the pizzas this way, or could we do this instead?' I'm like, 'Can you just follow the recipe please?'"

An employee described his work ethic. "I always like to stay busy. I always need to have something to work on. I don't want to just stand around confused, doing nothing." He detailed his responsibilities at a grocery store. "I just bag groceries for customers. I also help with carry-outs if they need any. I also bring in carts from outside...I also take out garbage...Sometimes I sweep the floors."

Loyalty and Retention

Long-term retention emerged as a significant benefit. One parent advocate noted her daughter has worked at the same grocery store chain for 15 years, following the same manager to different locations.

Another parent advocate emphasized the importance of retention. "Students like [name removed] are not crazy about change. I mean, if he has a job he likes and loves, he'll stay there 30 years. They're not

going to have turnover." The employee himself worked at one retailer for five years and has been at his current grocery position for two years.

A coffee shop owner was surprised by loyalty. "It didn't dawn on me that I would have all the same original baristas a year and a half later, and a waiting list of 40 people who want to work here."

Skill Development

Employers reported that employees developed job-specific competencies and broader professional skills, though growth required workplace-specific training rather than reliance on previous program experience. One employer explained:

They have to put six biscuits on a tray. So, I have a young man with [developmental disability] and he has to put six biscuits on the tray. Maybe their time in a transition program, they do piecework, like putting six little colored bears on a chart of one, two, three, four, five, six. So, it's a transferable skill that you would think like, 'Okay, well, they've been putting bears on numbers, their whole transition career.' It does not transfer. It doesn't. At least I haven't found that it does. So, just reteaching very job-specific things like this, it might take them a while, but then they'll get it.

Communication skills also improved, though employers noted this development was common among all young workers entering the workforce. The key to successful development was hands-on, job-specific instruction tailored to actual workplace responsibilities rather than assuming skills from previous programs would transfer directly.

One parent advocate noted growth in self-advocacy skills through transition programs such as Nebraska Transition College. "In Nebraska Transition College, they do have one or two courses that teach self-advocacy, and I've actually seen the difference in him, where he's had to go to his employer and say, 'This isn't working and here's why.' Whereas a few years ago, he would not have had the courage to do that."

Employees 19 and older can serve alcohol. One employer described the assumption that their staff with disabilities would not be able to get "ServeSafe" certification.

I had three staff with disabilities go through that online programming, and all three of them are certified. They all have intellectual disabilities. So, just those types of things, they're able to get certifications. They're able to learn the specific tasks of the job.

When these job-specific skills were combined with appropriate workplace supports and employer understanding, successful long-term placements emerged.

Successful Placements

Success hinged on employees feeling they belonged. As a parent advocate described, "I think that sense of, I belong here, I want to go to work, I want to groom for work, I want to be proud of where I work. I think that's what keeps people coming back to any job."

This parent advocate elaborated:

Where my daughter works, she knows everybody. She knows the meat department, they call her trouble, she calls them trouble. They say, 'Hey, trouble.' She knows the floral

department. That's her problem when she's in bakery and has to run out and get some more something, she's too chatty...She likes people, she knows people. And she doesn't hesitate to ask a customer who's looking for something, 'Do you need help?' Because she also knows the store, so, she can take them right where they need to be.

Trainer competence proved vital as one restaurant owner stated. "Whoever the trainer is or the manager is, they have to understand disability or understand how the brain learns. If they don't understand those two things and they just try to train them as if they were training everyone else, it's not a successful match."

A coffee shop owner described her systematic approach to workplace design:

I'm very, very purposeful of creating a space that's inclusive and accepting and patient. So that's part of it. But also I have designed...If you go to Scooter's or Starbucks, often they're measured by metrics, how fast you can crank out a drink, how many drinks are made per hour. I knew going in, we weren't trying to compete with that.

She explained specific adaptations, "We only have one size for hot and one size for cold. So, the recipes are the same for the most part. We're not changing ratios for every 18,000 different drink sizes."

Her visual support evolved and adapted over time to suit the needs of workers. "Initially, we started with all of the recipes printed out and on the wall. They're very big and they're just in blocks. And then that got to be too overwhelming because they were all on the wall. So now we have them on an iPad so they can just look at one at a time." Simple modifications helped. "I have tape on each syrup that says, 'Hot drink, three pumps. Cold drink, five pumps,' or whatever. So, they're just little tiny, tiny things, but that keep them moving independently."

One parent advocate highlighted a successful program model called Project Search:

It is a national curriculum. A school district partners with a local employer...The students are generally more high functioning, like [name], and they participate in a year long program where they're going every day to the employer. And then they're actually working with this employer. The employees are primed to be supportive and assisted. And then they also teach budgeting and life skills...It's a year-long program. And some students actually get hired when they're done. It's also a good opportunity for employers to check out, 'Oh, I'd like to hire this guy. I've worked with him for a year. I know he's good.'

Unexpected Benefits

Many employers were surprised that positive outcomes went beyond job performance to encompass community relationships and workplace culture. One employer reflected on the broader impact of employment:

I know the impact that this [employment] has been for a couple of the people that I've hired. They kind of got locked in during COVID and had a really hard time getting out into the community and getting back on track. So, one person had stopped driving altogether, and now she's starting to drive a little bit more, because she's got the confidence to do this, and she's got a job to go to. So, I think just seeing how much

employment means at a whole other level for this population. Employment's life-changing for everybody, but seeing the confidence, seeing the connection, seeing the change, and how important it is. The financial piece is super valuable, but it's also everything else: that pride, that accomplishment, and being willing to take risks in other places because they've been successful with employment.

Employers also noted rapid skill development and integration and described "Surprise at how quickly they fit in with the team and how hard they tried. The willingness to seek feedback and then be able to translate that into meaningful action and change." Another was struck by certification achievements and noted that "I was surprised that my staff could do the responsible beverage training."

Community response exceeded expectations. One employer worried about negative reactions but found their customers to be emotional in a positive manner. "They've thanked us. So, it's built a community amongst the customers." Another person summarized their experience. "I think they're proud that they have folks successfully working in their stores...it just shows what good humans can do, how we all can work together in a very positive way."

Challenges

While employers identified numerous strengths among employees with IDD, they also described barriers that complicated hiring and retention. These challenges ranged from application system difficulties to financial burdens created by extended training periods, and from navigating complex social interactions to addressing fundamental infrastructure gaps like transportation.

Notably, many challenges emerged not from the employees themselves but from organizational structures and resource limitations. Employers emphasized that with appropriate support, most of these barriers could be mitigated or eliminated. The following challenges represent both immediate workplace concerns and broader systemic issues that require coordinated solutions.

Application and Onboarding

Initial hiring processes posed barriers. Automated screening systems and compliance requirements created significant obstacles before candidates even reached the interview stage. One employer described the application process:

Getting through the application process can be a challenge. It's just, there's a lot, particularly through UNMC (University of Nebraska Medical Center), there's some barriers. You have to fill out certain questions accurately. But if you don't, your application will get kicked out. If your resume is not highlighting the experience in the way that the screener is going to recognize that skill, that will get kicked out. So, it's just really making sure... I think individuals with disabilities, we've got some folks in the community, they're helping with resume assistance, but don't always know what the screening software is to make sure that their application and resume get pushed through. I think that's kind of a trick for this population, especially if they haven't had significant work experience. That's getting everybody kicked out within less than five seconds from a lot of the software, like Indeed and some of those things.

Compliance training added hurdles as one employer told us. "Thirteen compliance trainings...each can take anywhere from five minutes to an hour...I've had some individuals, it may take us 13 tries on one

compliance training...And just the defeat when you're starting off and they're like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't do this job yet.'"

Underemployment

A significant challenge that emerged was underemployment, i.e., employees capable of more responsibility working limited hours in entry-level positions. One parent advocate described her son as "severely underemployed" working only 18 hours per week as a grocery bagger despite being 28 years old with years of work experience.

She explained the disconnect. "Those bagger jobs are usually for people in high school. And so we talk about the social component of work and how important that is for people to have work friendships and things like that. Most of the people he's working with are in high school." This can lead to social isolation as this informant continued, "Even with the girls, in this day and age, he has to be very careful communicating with the girls as a 28-year-old man to be making sure that they're not misconstruing anything he would say...So it makes his work life a little lonely, I think. Where so many people have very strong friendships in work. When you're underemployed or working with people who are way outside your age range, it makes for a lonely day at work."

The path from part-time to full-time can be difficult. As one parent advocate explained, "His goal is to get off of social security disability and get a full-time job and just live independently like the rest of us do. But until he has a full-time job in place, he can't do any of these things." The challenge is what is called incremental transition. "He can't go right now from 18 hours a week to 40 hours a week without crashing...His doctors and his employment team, they think it would be better if he gradually increased his hours so that he would be successful long-term."

Training Time and Costs

Beyond initial hiring barriers, extended training requirements created ongoing financial pressures for employers, particularly small businesses operating on tight labor budgets. Extended training periods created financial strain as an interview participant explained:

Just to hire the average employee, it's about \$1,700 to train the average employee in a restaurant setting. That's no disability of any kind in a very generic basic position, not even a culinary one, right? Just cashier, waitress, kitchen support staff, whatever. So, with our adults with disabilities, they require much more training and I have to pay them for that. As I'm paying them, that means I can't schedule another employee because I only get so much money.

This posed difficult decisions at times. "Do I keep this person with a disability in training and cut another staff and then I'm there trying to just double do both duties, or do I let payroll exceed that [limit]?"

Another employer highlighted ongoing needs:

Individuals with developmental disabilities need ongoing support potentially for months after their initial training. Without that support, things will come up unexpected within their positions or there's a schedule change or who they work with. Or there's just a change in how something is being done that they're used to it being a certain way. The consequences of that are confusion, chaos, frustration.

Social Interactions

Customer interactions presented challenges, particularly when employees lacked filters or understanding of workplace-appropriate communication. One employer remarked, "That social interaction, especially with customers, how quickly it can go downhill if there's not another person there supporting."

She provided a detailed example of an employee who was technically excellent at register operations but brought personal projects to work and made unsuitable comments to customers:

I had a student with autism working as my cashier. He was completely independent on the register, had great verbal communication skills in terms of getting orders back, whatever, but he also was writing a novel at home and brought it in to share...shared it with other employees, shared it with customers, and in his mind, he was so proud of his work.

I also would overhear or listen to conversations and he'd say things about the food that were his own opinions but were not appropriate to share. So, he'd say, 'The waffles, don't do the waffles. You need to get the breakfast burrito'...Then the customer would be like, 'Well, that's okay. I'm going to go ahead and stick with the waffles'. 'Oh, well, you're making a big mistake.'

The visibility of disabilities significantly affected customer responses as one employer explained. "When it's more visible, it's less problematic, but when it's more hidden disabilities, it's more problematic...Customers can get a little snarky and rude...Or they'll leave Google Reviews." Another informant acknowledged negative public reactions. "People have made just unnecessary mean comments. But that's just society in general, too."

Transportation Barriers

Transportation emerged as one of the most critical barriers to successful employment, affecting everything from initial job acceptance, to training opportunities, to long-term retention.

One parent advocate connected transportation to broader poverty. "That's a huge, huge reason that people like him struggle to work. And also why I think we have a lot of poverty in our city because people just can't get to the jobs consistently."

She contrasted experiences. "We lived in Germany for seven years, in Japan for five. And those countries have amazing public transportation...When we came back to Omaha, we were frustrated, to say the least, that you get one bus that goes West Roads to downtown."

This parent advocate continued by describing specific limitations:

We looked into if he could take the bus to the zoo, because we were taking him back and forth all the time...It was like two hours one way to go from West Omaha down to the zoo. And he'd have to get up at like four in the morning to catch buses and do transfers. And it's not safe for a person who's got an intellectual disability to be out and work at these hours.

One person with direct experience illustrated how transportation barriers derailed employment. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) taught her daughter to independently use the bus system to reach a volunteer position; the placement ended when the employer determined she needed more support than they could provide. Without transportation alternatives, "We started her in a day program just to give her something to do during the day than just sit at home. And she hated it. She wanted to work. Every day she came home hating it." This story illustrated how transportation success could evaporate when job placements failed, leaving families without viable options for maintaining employment momentum.

Another employer stated. "Transportation can be a huge make-or-break deal on any kind of employment." Public transportation infrastructure proved inadequate as bus systems don't reach residential neighborhoods or serve the an entire metropolitan area or small town. One informant noted that bus route infrastructure was not growing at the same pace as the city they lived in.

Solutions exist within current systems but remain poorly understood. Only one of three available Medicaid plans offers non-medical transportation. State officials are exploring ride-share options for individuals on waivers, recognizing the particular severity of this barrier, especially in rural areas.

Overcoming Challenges

Employers described various practical strategies for addressing workplace challenges, from direct communication approaches to physical adaptations. One informant stressed directness in corrective feedback: "I call them friction points. Here are friction points that we've encountered, and this is what we do to fix them...You have to say, 'Hey, this is where you messed up. This is what you do to fix it, and this is what it'll look like next time. Okay, high five, buddy, get back to work.'"

For application barriers, one worked directly with her institution's HR department to modify screening processes. One employer described simple but effective workplace adaptations:

We have them on an iPad so they can just look at one at a time...I have tape on each syrup that says, 'Hot drink, three pumps. Cold drink, five pumps'...they're just little tiny, tiny things, but that keep them moving independently.

While these workplace-level adaptations addressed immediate challenges, employers also identified broader systemic supports needed to make inclusive employment sustainable at scale, which are explored in detail in subsequent sections.

Several promising models aimed at supporting individuals with IDD in finding and maintaining employment were mentioned by informants, including: Project Search (school-employer partnerships), Autism Action Partnership (relationship-building first), and peer mentorship with financial incentives. Technical solutions like video job descriptions and pre-employment training platforms could address barriers.

Reflections: What I Wish I Knew

Employers' understanding of inclusive employment evolved significantly through direct experience. When asked what they wished they had known before hiring and what advice they would offer other employers, responses revealed a consistent pattern: initial nervousness and knowledge gaps gave way

to practical wisdom and recognition that many assumed challenges were manageable with appropriate preparation and mindset shifts.

Initial Knowledge Gaps

Employers entering inclusive employment often lacked critical information that complicated early placements. The range of preparedness varied considerably; those who had designed businesses specifically around employing individuals with disabilities felt well-equipped, while others, even those with special education expertise, encountered unexpected challenges.

The financial and time investment required for training emerged as the most common surprise. One employer stated directly, "the amount of time I was going to take to train them from a paid employee standpoint." This commitment proved more substantial than anticipated, creating budget pressures that could have been anticipated with better advance information.

Understanding the job coach's role represented another critical gap. One employer explained, "I wish we understood the role of the job coach better...I wish we understood [our employee's] triggers better...Some individuals do need a little bit longer breaks or more frequent breaks." This knowledge deficit extended to understanding reasonable accommodations that could prevent problems before they developed.

Transportation constraints surprised employers who had focused on workplace readiness without considering how employees would physically reach the job. Employers underscored the fundamental importance of transportation to placement success.

However, employers emphasized that these surprises emerged not from fundamental barriers but from information gaps that could be addressed through better preparation and communication with support providers before hiring.

Advice for Employers

When asked what advice they would give to other employers considering hiring individuals with developmental disabilities, informants pointed out fundamental principles beyond specific accommodation or technical support. Their recommendations clustered around three core themes: presuming competence while maintaining patience, focusing on skills and job matching rather than disability labels, and investing in thorough, multimodal training (visual aids, written materials, verbal instructions).

Notably, several emphasized that many of these practices—patience, clear communication, and structured training—benefit all employees, not just those with disabilities.

Presume Competence

One employer was emphatic. "Assume competence. Don't look at what you think they can't do. Teach them to do what you need them to do...And then, just be kind." She noted employees often get slowly phased out by other employers, saying, "Hours are just slowly cut...they're just slowly trying to phase them out." She concluded by stating, "You have to be really patient. So competent, yes, they can do it. Doesn't mean they're going to do it as fast or as well or as by-the-book...it just depends on the person, like it would with anybody else."

One parent advocate emphasized the need for broader understanding and breaking down stereotypes. "I guess, educate employers that autism is not just Rain Man. I think so many people have the mind that, especially older people, when you're talking about a person on the spectrum, they think of the person who is on one end of the spectrum who might have a lot of challenging behaviors or issues. They're not so much thinking about the person like him, who has learned to manage some of his challenges and grow through them."

Focus on Skills

One informant stressed, "Overlook the disability and see the skills that they have. Look at them as a skilled worker that can contribute and add value to their business."

Another employer stressed matching skills to tasks, saying, "Really understand the employee's strengths and weaknesses for what the position is that they're hiring for...if the position is very like rigid and routine, and that employee has autism and they thrive off rigid and routine, it's going to be a great match."

Invest in Training

One employer emphasized it is beneficial to invest in the training provided. "Very thorough training...think about it in a really multimodal sense. So maybe you're going to have a checklist...And maybe there's going to be some visuals."

These recommendations revealed that successful employers learned to view inclusive employment not as charity requiring special patience but as standard workforce development requiring intentional, structured approaches that benefit entire organizations.

Support Needs for Employers

When asked what supports would help Nebraska employers hire and retain individuals with developmental disabilities, informants identified three critical systemic changes that would substantially reduce the challenges described in the previous section. Transportation infrastructure topped the list, with one noting, "I would expand our city bus system. This is the first community of this size that I've lived in where the bus didn't travel into neighborhoods." Financial support during training emerged as equally critical. "Someone like a Voc Rehab needs to take on the payment of wages until both [parties] and the business agree, yes, it's the right fit...that takes the stress off the employer." One employer added, "It's almost like the individuals with IDD don't need a job coach. It's the employers that do." Knowledge and awareness also proved essential, with employers emphasizing that many are "just nervous or afraid" and need to see successful employment "in action in other places."

Beyond these overarching priorities, employers articulated specific needs ranging from immediate practical assistance to systemic changes. Their responses revealed that many existing support structures were either poorly understood or inadequately implemented. The following detail how employers imagine job coaching, incentives, and employer and employee support systems could be implemented effectively.

Job Coaching

Job coaching emerged as the most frequently mentioned support need, though employers emphasized they needed better understanding of what job coaches actually do, and how to work with them

effectively. As one person explained, "An understanding of their role. They're not just the transportation there and back...who's their supervisor? So, who can I notify if I have concerns about the job coach?"

Beyond traditional job coaching for employees, several employers identified a critical gap including employers themselves need coaching. One employer described an ideal scenario, "A one-on-one coaching program with employers where either they can come shadow people who are already doing it, or if they hire somebody new, then you can come train them."

Employers repeatedly noted the importance of on-site, contextualized support. One employer said:

It has to be on-site training. There's no training that can be presented at any workshop or conference that prepares employers...I need someone to come to my business and meet all of my employees, learn about my company, learn about what the job duties are, and then say, 'Oh, I have the right candidate for you'.

This hands-on approach should be extended to the onboarding process as one person suggested, "Assistance with the onboarding process...figuring out accommodations, figuring out how to provide some guidance on how to navigate those accommodations." These supports need to be tailored to specific workplace contexts rather than delivered through generic training sessions.

Incentives

Beyond operational supports, employers also discussed financial considerations and recognition mechanisms that might encourage more businesses to hire individuals with disabilities.

Opinions on incentives diverged sharply. One person was resistant:

I hate incentives because...the employer shouldn't have to get incentives to hire the right person...I feel like incentives give the impression that the employee is less than. The incentive is you're going to get a great employee who's going to show up every day.

However, others acknowledged financial realities. An informant suggested redirecting funding from day programs to support job coaches and wage subsidies during training periods. The same informant also proposed non-monetary recognition, such as gubernatorial proclamations or public nominations, honoring businesses with strong track records of hiring individuals with disabilities. The consensus among those supporting incentives was that they should offset genuine training costs rather than serve as additional payments.

Support Systems for Employers

When asked to design an ideal support system for employing individuals with developmental disabilities, employers described comprehensive frameworks that balanced structure with flexibility. Their visions shared common elements such as pre-employment preparation, skilled job matching, on-site training support, and ongoing consultation—while acknowledging that no single prescribed approach could work for all individuals or all workplaces.

One employer described the importance of job coaches. "They would be matched to a job with a job coach that understands the needs of the business as well as their individual needs. It's like a recruiter...a scout."

Another employer put emphasis on flexibility:

They're all different. We couldn't put together a boxed package...I think an open mind in learning to read people and adapt for what they specifically need...And support. I guess maybe somebody to ask questions of.

Another person offered a sketch of their vision:

A very thorough orientation to whatever the job is...modeling for the supervisor of what the expectations are and how are we going to align your expectations with the ability of the person...And maybe a resource of, here's a bunch of visuals that you could use as needed.

An employee reinforced the use of visuals and even described videos used. "One employer actually had a video you could click on...There was a link where they had somebody who was already doing this job explaining what you would do and what it's like to work for the employer... it was maybe 90 seconds." This illustrated the value of having practical, accessible resources available for employers to utilize in developing accessible trainings.

Outreach and Awareness

While employers articulated clear visions for ideal support systems, they underscored that such systems would only succeed if employers knew they existed and understood how to access them. When asked how to better reach employers with information about supports and opportunities for hiring individuals with developmental disabilities, informants stressed two critical components: the method of outreach and the framing of the message. Their recommendations revealed that traditional approaches, mass emails and generic workshops, proved largely ineffective, while direct, personal engagement combined with business-focused messaging resonated with employers' actual needs and motivations.

Face-to-Face engagement

Personal, face-to-face contact emerged as the most effective outreach strategy. One employer emphasized:

Two things that I have found seem to work the best are social media...But the other thing is really...boots on the ground, is me walking around...having easy-to-read lots of pictures, information about who we are, what we do.

This employer was clear about email limitations, "You're going to get an email and they're going to be like, 'Delete.'...You know how many emails I delete a day?" Another agreed:

We just have to talk to them. You got to go to the business...talk to employers, talk to Chamber of Commerce, and just keep knocking on those doors...But not as, they're doing us a favor. We're doing them the favor.

Lunch and Learns

Additional strategies included lunch-and-learns at workplaces, showcasing success stories through social media, and partnering with nonprofit organizations. One employer stressed a fundamental information gap. "As an employer, I would want to know what are my actual resources...If I as an employer knew what was out there, I would take advantage of that, but I don't know a single resource."

Message framing was considered crucial. One employer-owner reflected:

I don't think at this point in 2025, how desperate people are for workers and good workers, I don't think anyone cares about the disability component... I need someone in this position starting tomorrow...I don't think it's necessarily so much about the disability piece. It's recruiting talent that matches the business.

Social Media and Public Service Announcements

Multiple informants emphasized visual success stories. The parent advocate suggested. "Well, I think let's use social media. Let's do blasts of benefits of showing positive experiences of workplace where people with disabilities work. Let's have models out there that are visible."

A restaurant owner described effective content:

If you do use social media, it's creating almost...making people see...if we can't get in and give everybody individual coaching, seeing the benefits of what that would look like, like, 'Hey, this could be you.'...This could be you if you hire someone with a disability. I have cute pictures. These are real pictures. They're not staged, for the most part. It is just them and who they are.

One parent advocate proposed a public service announcement campaign and provided the following vignette:

Social media is everything these days, and if we want to reach employers who haven't even considered that...I guess I'm looking at it in terms of a public service announcement...little commercial, 30 to 60 second slots where they would give you public service information...But using humor...Take [name] and do a video and have him say something like, 'I'm so-and-so, 28 years old. I have autism. I want to work. I'm a hard worker. I do this. I do that.' Take a vignette of young people like him and do a PSA and spread it in all sorts of social media.

Finally, one informant summarized the value of this important workforce. "This is a talented workforce. You're missing out on a talented workforce...I think we just need to keep hitting on the value and the talent." The consensus was clear: frame employment of individuals with disabilities as accessing an untapped talent pool rather than as charitable inclusion.

Planning Group Review and Input

Following interviews, the NCDD Planning Group convened to review preliminary findings and provide additional input. The group included representatives from Vocational Rehabilitation, disability service providers, advocacy organizations, policy experts, and parent advocates.

Key Themes

Planning group members validated the interview findings. One noted "I was really interested to see the desire on behalf of the employers to get training... Not putting all the emphasis on training the employee to do the job, but it's also training employers to understand and broaden their horizons."

Another observed. "There is a desire for this information and a desire on behalf of employers to employ this community. You can build on that."

The group identified information overload as a critical barrier:

If there are a variety of trainings or information or organizations providing that information, maybe we need to figure out a way to get all those folks talking together and producing one as opposed to 13 different scattershot. Because if you have 13, you can easily get confused... Shut down.

Transportation was confirmed as a longstanding and systemic issue. "That's going to be a big, big issue. Because you can do the job but if you can't get there, why even apply for it?" The group discussed Medicaid waiver modifications, city transportation planning engagement, and business advocacy for expanded transit.

Another planning group member who also provided a parent advocate perspective raised the issues of underemployment. "For 10 years, my son has been severely underemployed... He's a 28-year-old bagger. He's capable of much more and you can't live on that wage." This highlighted gaps between hiring and career advancement.

For employer support, one parent advocate suggested. "Just asking the individual, what do you need in order to be a successful employee? Let the employee help educate the employer." Another stressed. "Bring in the coworkers because the coworkers can make or break a placement."

Outreach recommendations included Chamber of Commerce and SHRM presentations, webinar series, lunch-and-learns, state government as a model employer, and return-on-investment data compilation. Participants cautioned against over-reliance on broad marketing. "The best way is when you have a skilled employment specialist spending lots of time in the community building relationships with employers."

One participant discussed a significant policy issue regarding Medicaid. "Would you rather spend Medicaid dollars on people spending their days in "dayhab" where they need constant supervision, or invest in helping people develop job skills so that they can be truly integrated and contributing members of their communities?"

The planning group discussion reinforced key findings from interviews while adding other considerations, particularly underemployment and the need for career advancement opportunities beyond entry-level positions. Their input underscored that addressing employment barriers for individuals with developmental disabilities requires coordinated action across multiple levels such as streamlined information systems, transportation support, sustained relationship-building with employers, and strategic messaging that emphasizes business value and workforce needs rather than charity.

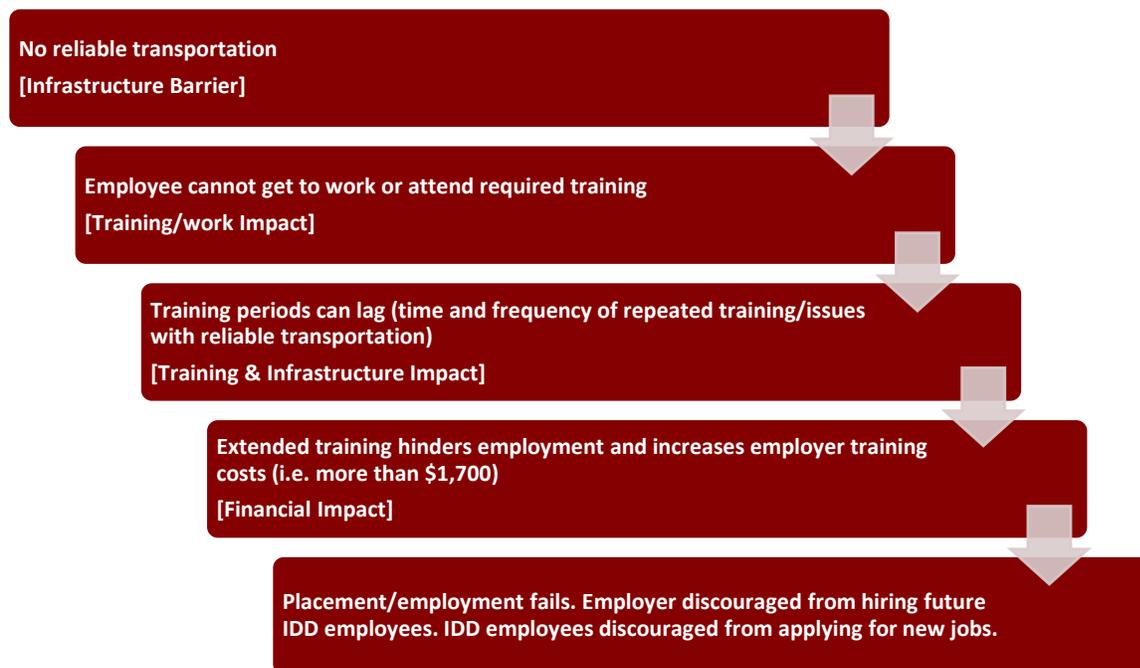
Discussion and Next Steps

Survey respondents and interview informants emphasized that employees with developmental disabilities bring significant strengths to the workplace including reliability, consistency, and ability to develop specialized skills. These distinct skills, abilities, and talents at an individual level can uniquely

position these individuals, in the same way as any other individual, to be a qualified candidate to fill an open position for an employer. However, systemic barriers, including transportation limitations, extended training needs, application obstacles, and financial constraints, do sometimes create challenges.

Figure 3 demonstrates how barriers cascade across domains. This transportation example illustrates a pattern identified across all interview findings. When one barrier exists, it triggers failures across multiple domains. Without reliable transportation, employees cannot get to their jobs or attend training consistently, extending what should be a 3-month training period to 6+ months. As one employer noted, basic employee training costs approximately \$1,700, but when training periods extend due to barriers like transportation or inadequate support, employers absorb significantly increased costs while paying trainees. This financial strain can lead to placement failures and discourage employers from future inclusive hiring, while, at the same time discouraging people with IDD from applying to different positions.

Figure 3. How Barriers Cascade Across Domains



Often, successful placements depend on appropriate job matching, adequate training time and support, workplace adaptations, and effective communication. A primary finding from both the survey and the interviews was the need for both an improved understanding of and increased access to job coaches and employment specialists to help support both employees and employers. Employers consistently noted that, given proper support, individuals with developmental disabilities are valuable employees who contribute meaningfully to workplace culture and business success.

The overarching message was clear. **Hiring individuals with developmental disabilities should not be viewed as charitable but as accessing an untapped talent pool.** However, realizing this potential requires addressing systemic barriers through enhanced transportation infrastructure, financial support

during training periods, improved application processes, and accessible, practical guidance for employers.

Interview informants emphasized that outreach efforts should primarily focus on face-to-face engagement, showcase success stories, provide concrete resource information, and frame the conversation around business value and talent rather than disability. As one employer stated, NCDD and partners should have the attitude, "We're doing them the favor" by providing qualified employees, not vice versa. However, survey findings indicated that online webinars or workshops and informational guides and toolkits were among the most valuable resources. Regardless of the outreach method used, the content must be topic-specific and address gaps in understanding pertaining to hiring and supporting individuals with IDD in the workplace.

Recommended Next Steps

With the information collected via the methods in this study, NCDD would like to be poised to develop an awareness campaign responsive to the needs, concerns, and knowledge expressed by employers as it pertains to hiring and employing individuals with IDD. **Based on these findings, NCDD may consider the following next steps organized by implementation timeline:**

Immediate Actions (0-6 months):

- **Employer Resource Toolkits** - Develop separate toolkits for hiring and employing individuals with IDD, including contacts for supported employment resources. Toolkits should be heavy on visuals (infographics, 90-second video examples), accessible (audio versions, high contrast), and available in digital and printable formats.
- **Transportation Resource Guide** - Compile information on Medicaid plans offering non-medical transportation, Handi-Van eligibility and application process, transit advocacy contacts, and case examples of transportation solutions other employers have implemented.
- **Grassroots Outreach Initiative (Face-to-Face Engagement)** - Schedule presentations at Chambers of Commerce and SHRM chapters featuring employer testimonials and success stories. Develop one-page resource document with business benefits, available supports, etc.

Medium-Term Actions (6-18 months):

- **Lunch and Learn Training Series for Supervisors/Employers** covering:
 - Success Stories: What works and business impact
 - Communication and Feedback: Direct communication techniques and "friction point" management
 - Training Strategies: Use of visuals, breaking down tasks, multimodal instruction
 - Full Employment Lifecycle: Application screening, onboarding, and advancement opportunities
- **Inclusive Employer Recognition Program** - Establish Bronze/Silver/Gold certification levels based on number of employees with IDD, retention, job coaching support, and advancement

opportunities. Recognition includes certificates, window signage/logos, website listing, and featured case studies. Creates visible models of successful inclusive employment, recognizes employers, and generates authentic content for outreach.

- **Bolster Current Job Coaches and Train Others** - Train job coaches on business operations and employer needs, not just employee support. Use employer feedback to improve coaching quality.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that Nebraska employers recognize the value of employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and, given appropriate supports, are willing and able to provide meaningful employment opportunities. The primary barriers are not attitudinal but systemic, such as transportation infrastructure gaps, financial constraints for small businesses, fragmented support systems, and scattered information creating confusion and disengagement. NCDD's awareness campaign can address these root causes through the phased approach outlined above, creating sustainable improvements in employment outcomes for Nebraskans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Appendix A – Employer Survey

NCDD Employer Survey Questions

The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (NUPPC) has partnered with the Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities (NCDD) to assess employer awareness of and opinions related to employing people living with developmental disabilities.

The CDC defines developmental disabilities as "a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas. These conditions begin during the developmental period, may impact day-to-day functioning, and usually last throughout a person's lifetime." This population represents a significant and diverse talent pool with varying abilities, skills, and support needs.

Current employment statistics show that individuals with developmental disabilities experience lower workforce participation rates compared to the general population. Understanding employer perspectives on hiring practices, workplace accommodations, and potential barriers is essential for identifying opportunities to bridge this employment gap. This survey aims to gather insights from employers across various industries to better understand current practices, challenges, and interest in expanding recruitment and retention of workers with developmental disabilities.

You will not be asked for your name, position, or company name in this survey. Results will be reported together with the results from all survey respondents. This survey is voluntary, and you may skip any questions you do not prefer to answer. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Ashley Miller (amiller102@unl.edu). Thank you in advance for your input!

1. Which of the following best describes your workplace?

- a. Public sector (government or government-funded)
- b. Private sector
- c. Non-profit or nongovernmental organization
- d. Other (please specify) _____

2. Which industry best describes your business or the work you do? (select all that apply)

- a. Agriculture, Environment & Natural Resources
- b. Arts, Media & Entertainment
- c. Construction & Skilled Trades
- d. Education & Training
- e. Finance, Insurance & Real Estate
- f. Government & Public Administration
- g. Healthcare & Social Assistance
- h. Hospitality, Tourism & Food Services
- i. Information Technology & Software
- j. Legal & Professional Services
- k. Manufacturing & Engineering
- l. Marketing, Advertising & Communications
- m. Nonprofit, Faith-Based & Philanthropy

- n. Transportation, Logistics & Utilities
- o. Other (Please specify) _____

3. In what city and state are the headquarters of your business located?

- a. _____

4. What is the approximate number of employees in your company?

- a. 1-10
- b. 11-50
- c. 51-100
- d. 101-500
- e. 500+

5. Does your company currently employ anyone with a developmental disability?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to answer
- d. Unsure

6. Has your company ever employed anyone with a developmental disability in the past?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to answer
- d. Unsure

7. What has been your experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities?

8. Based on your understanding or experience, which of the following do you believe could be potential benefits of employing individuals with developmental disabilities? (Check all that apply)

- a. Access to job coaching or training support programs
- b. Addressing staffing needs across various positions in the organization
- c. Broader customer appeal through hiring practices
- d. Enhanced team morale and workplace culture
- e. Improved workplace diversity
- f. Increased employee loyalty and retention
- g. Positive public image and community engagement
- h. Reliable and consistent work performance
- i. Strengthened organizational values and social responsibility
- j. Tax credits or financial incentives
- k. Other (please specify) _____

9. What are the potential challenges in hiring employees with developmental disabilities? (Check all that apply)

- a. Concerns about productivity or task performance
- b. Concern about individuals' potential loss or impact on public benefits like Social Security disability benefits, Medicaid, SNAP, housing, etc.
- c. Concerns about workplace safety or liability
- d. Difficulty matching job roles to individual strengths
- e. Lack of awareness about available support programs
- f. Lack of qualified candidates
- g. Legal or regulatory concerns
- h. Limited internal resources to support inclusion efforts
- i. Misunderstandings or stigma among staff or customers
- j. Need for additional training or job coaching
- k. Supervisors lacking experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities
- l. Transportation challenges affecting reliable workplace attendance
- m. Uncertainty about how to provide accommodations
- n. Unclear policies or procedures for inclusive hiring
- o. Other (please specify) _____

10. What would your business need to increase confidence in hiring and retaining individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities?

11. What resources or support would make you more comfortable hiring people with intellectual or developmental disabilities? (Check all that apply)

- a. Access to disability and public benefits consultation
- b. Access to job coaches or employment specialists
- c. Access to a pool of qualified candidates
- d. Access to reliable transportation for employees
- e. Assistance with onboarding and role matching
- f. Clear policies and procedures for inclusive hiring
- g. Funding or incentives to support inclusive hiring
- h. Information on tax incentives or financial assistance
- i. Legal guidance on hiring people with disabilities
- j. Guidance on how to provide reasonable accommodations
- k. Mentorship or peer support from other inclusive employers
- l. Ongoing consultation or technical assistance
- m. Partnerships with local disability employment organizations
- n. Success stories or case studies from other employers
- o. Training for supervisors and staff on inclusion and disability awareness
- p. Other (please specify) _____

12. Would you consider participating in a program or initiative to help integrate employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities into your workplace?

- a. Yes, definitely
- b. Maybe, if there are clear benefits and support
- c. No, I don't think it's feasible for my business

13. Would you be interested in attending training on best practices for hiring and supporting employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities?

- a. Yes
- b. Maybe, depending on the content
- c. No

14. If no, what would increase your interest?

15. How would you prefer to receive information about hiring individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities? (Select all that apply)

- a. Direct consultations with experts
- b. Informational guides or toolkits
- c. In-person training sessions
- d. Online webinars or workshops
- e. Success stories and case studies
- f. Other (please specify) _____

16. Would you like to participate in a mentorship program with other employers who have successfully hired employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities?

- a. Yes, definitely
- b. Maybe, depending on the time commitment
- c. No

18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience or thoughts on hiring individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities?

Appendix B – Interview Questions

Six key topic areas – strengths, challenges, reflections, employer supports, outreach and awareness

Strengths

1. What was a deciding factor in your decision to hire a person with developmental disabilities?
 - a) What strengths or skills did they “bring to the table” and did they develop new strengths or skills?
2. Would you consider this employee to be a successful “placement”? What made it successful or not?
 - a) What, if anything, surprised you? What, if anything, did you take away from hiring a person/people with developmental disabilities?
3. Please describe the overall benefits or drawbacks, if any, of employing a person with developmental disabilities.

Challenges [what has been tried?]

1. What challenges, if any, have you experienced employing individuals with developmental disabilities?
2. How did you overcome or work around those challenges? What “worked”?
3. What would make employing people with developmental disabilities less challenging?

Reflections: [what I wish I knew?]

1. Before hiring individuals with developmental disabilities, what do you wish you had understood better?
2. Were there any surprises — positive and/or negative?
3. What advice would you give to an employer when hiring individuals with developmental disabilities?

Support Needs for Employer

1. What supports would help Nebraska employers hire people with developmental disabilities?
2. What technical assistance would benefit your organization or other employers that have hired and/or want to hire people with developmental disabilities?
3. What incentives would help Nebraska employers hire people with developmental disabilities?
4. If you could design the “ideal support system” for employing individuals with developmental disabilities, what would it include?

Outreach and Awareness

1. The goal of this project is to develop materials to raise awareness about the supports available for employers and employees related to hiring and employing individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. How do we better reach employers with this information?