**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**Assessing and Developing the Soft Skills of Today's Workforce**

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LAURA CASERTANO: I want to welcome everyone to today's "Assessing and Developing the Soft Skills of Today's Workforce" webinar, and we're going to turn it over to your moderator today, Pam Frugoli, a workforce analyst with the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. Pam, take it away.

PAM FRUGOLI: Thank you, Laura, and I just want to welcome everyone. Thanks for joining us today. We're glad to see all the interest in this topic.

So, in order to get to know you a little bit, we have a couple of opening polls. Do you currently use a tool to assess the soft skills of jobseekers you serve? And I see we've been getting responses already. You can continue to answer them. So, it's a good split. About a third say yes and half say no and some say I'm not sure.

And our second poll is about the question what you're most looking forward to having answers in today's webinar. So, we're not asking you to answer the question. Just which one would you be most interested in. So, it looks like, wow, 78 percent want to know what tools are available to assess and develop soft skills. So, you've come to the right place. That's excellent.

And, so, I want to just review today's agenda. I want to – (inaudible) – and acknowledge that it has been a tough year, but I want to thank you all for everything you've done over the past year to serve the American workforce. And, hopefully, the things you will learn today will help you continue to do a great job going forward.

And I'm going to provide a little background and context, and then we'll go into success stories from our four presenters. And then we'll have time for some questions and answers and panel discussion and a few next steps.

So, today's speakers represent a good, diverse viewpoint of target audiences that they serve, different products that they use, and also geographic distribution. Amanda Daniels is with GPS Education Partners in Wisconsin. Andy Ridley is with the workforce system in the state of Arizona. Luke Dowden is from Alamo Colleges in Texas. And Terri Cooley-Taylor is from the EARN Program in Washington Greene County Job Training Agency in Pennsylvania.

So, I do just want to provide a little bit of context. We've called – in the title of the webinar, we've said soft skills, but we realize that it's been referred to in many different ways and we list some of them here. And there's also different frameworks which – (inaudible) – different amounts of soft skills, and we call them by name. But it's still an important concept that can be addressed in a different way.

But what we do also want to emphasize is that we know for sure that whatever you call them, there is demand for – employers often, when they talk about skills shortages, say, one of our big skill shortages is soft skills. But, further, all of – many recent studies that are looking at the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on the future workforce needs talk about the advantage of that humans have the soft skills, empathy, certain kinds of problem solving.

And so, it's more important than ever that we make sure that, in addition to the technical skills that prepare people for an occupation, that they also have the soft skills so that they can work as a team and advance on the job.

And I just want to note that the Department of Education has actually looked at 28 different of these soft skills employability skills framework. And we have a matrix that there's a link to and you can see on this slide. But if you want to know more about some of the main frameworks – and we'd like to acknowledge that information in – from the Occupational Information Network or O\*NET is one of those frameworks. And in addition, our own Department of Labor competency models have soft skills as the foundation.

The first three tiers here at the bottom, we call these foundational tiers, include personal effectiveness skills, academic competency, sort of the foundational academic competencies that let you go on and learn more technical skills later, and then employability competencies or workforce – workplace competencies.

So, they've always been an essential part of the competency models that we developed at Department of Labor and underlie every industry competency model. But the questions for the entire nationwide workforce system are, how do we assess if the people we are serving have these important skills, and how can we help them to develop these skills to make them more successful job candidates once we've done an assessment?

So, because – so, our competency model team got out to look at this and we conducted an environmental scan of a wide range of soft skills assessments and learning tools, and we focused on those tools that had a postsecondary or workforce development user base, not just ones that were used in K-12.

We looked for alignment with some of the elements of our building blocks that I just showed you. And we wanted things that included both an assessment and learning capabilities because it would be terrible to assess your customer and find that they are lacking in soft skills or employability skills and then not help them. So – and there are a lot of new tools on the market lately.

So, we recognized that frontline staff don't always have the time or resources to look at all of the things that are out there and make some kind of judgment between them. It's difficult to find out just what is out there and how to compare. And so, today we've brought together four individuals representing various facets of the workforce development system from around the country to tell you about their experiences using four different assessment and learning tools.

And they're going to describe how they selected them and how they use them and provide you with useful information to consider in making your decision in this regard. And also, in the next steps we'll tell you about how you can learn about more besides these four, because there are definitely many other tools out there.

We just want to note that, as we're sharing this information today via this webinar, this does not constitute an endorsement of any of these tools or specific products or services by the Employment and Training Administration or by the Department of Labor. We're sharing this information from your peers as a technical learning opportunity. Thank you.

And so, then before we go to our next speaker, we have one more polling question. In your role, do you or have you supported youth with developing soft skills? Because we also know that that's one big area of emphasis for young people.

Oh, and I see, wow. Really shocked. So, it looks like a good two-thirds say yes, and a third have said no. That's fine because, as I said, the speakers represent different – worked with different target groups. It's not all youth oriented. Okay. Great.

And so, now, we can go to our first presenter, Amanda Daniels with GPS Education Partners. Take it away, Amanda.

AMANDA DANIELS: Thank you so much. Hello, I am Amanda Daniels. I am the curriculum and instructional design manager for GPS Education Partners. GPS is a nonprofit who works with both schools and businesses and then community partnerships such as regional education co-ops. Sometimes Boys and Girls Clubs are another example, and we build a work-based learning programs and we also help them identify tools for these programs.

So, in terms of the two-thirds of you who do work with youth, that is who GPS Education Partners with. We target 16- to 18-year-olds, sometimes either youth who qualify for WIOA funding but not always. You can see that we spread across the United States. And so, one of the considerations we looked at when developing and identifying tools, will our tools work for the social-emotional and sometimes the career readiness programs across the nation?

So, that is a component that we consider. And as I tell you a little bit more, you could see from that last slide, we work with nearly a hundred businesses in any given year. And you are – I'm sure I am not alone in the fact that I have heard from so many businesses, if you could just find somebody with good soft skills, then we will do the technical training.

And what that really tells us is that it's a key component for hiring. And so, in working with youth, we need to validate that our students have these skills before we send them into the workforce to be career and college ready.

But the other thing that it told us in our research is that businesses neither have the time nor the tools to really build these skills. So, we wanted – as a training program, we wanted to keep those factors in mind.

And so, over a course of about six months, although we've taken many stabs at this because it's really a complicated process and we noticed that in our research – and we looked at lots of tools, from Skills U.S.A. to Education Design Lab. The language is not consistent. Many people use the same words over but have different meanings. And so, it's really important to us to have a great idea for, when we use the terms, what is it business partners are working with.

So, in addition to identifying what the key skills are that are being identified in national certification, what is it our business partners are looking for? And so, we took some time with this research to both build tools to support students and tools to support businesses. And we developed a program that's tiered. So, students first learn employability skills. When they have validated those on the job through performance reviews, then they move on to professional skills and so on.

And so, then what we wanted was how do we assess these skills, and how do we provide coaching and training resources? And, ultimately, after a lot of research, you can hardly go to any education or workforce development conference without finding companies such as PAIRIN who are providing these tools. We landed on PAIRIN. We use the PAIRIN essential skills tools, and that's a two-component tool.

So, one side is for your administrative staff, and that is – that's the data. That's the coaching tool that you would use with your students or with your clients. And then it also is a personal side. So, your clients have their own interface where they can interact with the survey, which is the assessment tool, and with curriculum to help them build the skills that employers are looking for. And you can see that there are a vast number of skills, and we worked with PAIRIN to customize our target.

So, we have roughly 26 specific skills that we are looking at, and it was this comprehensive nature that really drew us to PAIRIN. But what I would tell you as a client will keep us with PAIRIN, they provide us so much data and really work with us to refine what we're trying to achieve.

So, if you take a look at these graphs, these are from 2019. Our students had double-digit growth that first year. So, very astounding. We attribute it to the fact that, not only are we using PAIRIN curriculum, but we also – we do on-the-job assessment.

So, our business partners who work with our students have rubrics that they use to evaluate students. How are they performing? Where could they get better? And so, you can see – we can see how students are doing, but we can also see there's a little green line. You'll see it's got a downward trend. We can identify where could our program use some continuous support or continuous development. And I love that feature.

There is nothing about the customer experience with PAIRIN that I could complain about. I will say, when we came into this, when we started looking for software or for tools, we had a very clear vision for what we wanted. And so, I would say PAIRIN is a terrific tool of you are going to develop programing and you're going to want to potentially adapt or continuously improve. That is their specialty. And, again, there are so many components, and there's also training to go with this.

So, there's both the social psychology training to help users, so your workforce coaches, to help them better understand how to work with your clients, but then there's also the tools and resources training to help you understand where you click to find the data. How do you perform report queries?

So, it's a very comprehensive tool. And, again, I would just say you will have a better time finding tools if you have a clear vision for what you want. I would encourage you to speak to your business partners to make sure what you want aligns to what your business partners want.

We went through multiple iterations of our on-the-job rubric. So, I think that's really important that you help your clients understand the PAIRIN tools will give them tools for their toolbox – right – their personal toolbox to help them better meet employer expectations.

And then the on-the-job performance will help them see it through the employer's eyes. How am I doing? How do I measure up? Which tools in my toolbox do I need to tap into to improve?

And then, finally, I would say we change. The environment changes. Business needs change. And so, I would encourage you to embrace continuous improvement and be comfortable with the idea that finding a tool may not be one-and-done deal. And so, identifying a tool that will help you identify areas for growth and that is big enough to help you grow and adapt, I find that to be incredibly important.

And just to give a little perspective on what our success rates are, aside from that double-digit growth, we have business partners who they partner with us for benevolent reasons; right? They want students to have job opportunities, but they don't necessarily have an after graduation hiring opportunity.

And so, what we have done – and you'll hear I'm not the – we're not the only organization who has done this. We've created a digital badge that connects the on-the-job performance to this sort of knowledge and assessment piece that PAIRIN provides so that business partners who see this endorsement or this digital badge, they have a clear definition for what rigor was behind the student earning the badge. And we open up that to partners across the United States for headhunting so they have a clear idea.

We also coach our students on how to talk about their soft skills, to discuss what their strengths are. And just in closing, one of the components of PAIRIN is that it does help students identify and talk about these strengths in a workplace environment. So, we'll cover questions and answers at the end, but I will take it and pass it off to Pam.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you so much, Amanda. That's very informative.

So, we have one more polling question here. What agencies can partner when implementing soft skill assessment programs? Workforce, commerce, education, all of the above and more? So, that's sort of a gimme, isn't it? Yes. That's one of those where we're trying to say, yes. All of the above. Great.

So, let's move on then to Andy Ridley.

ANDY RIDLEY: Hello, everyone. I'm Andy Ridley, workforce program manager in the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity, in which my primary assignment is managing the Arizona Career Readiness Program. I've been in workforce development for about nine years, and prior to that I was in education leadership as a principle curriculum and assessment designer and data analyst and prior to that teaching mathematics and Spanish.

I intend to focus this presentation on how Arizona successfully launched and scaled up a statewide workforce skills development and assessment program, specifically soft skills and fully integrated with developing and assessing foundational workplace academic skills, which in total we call career readiness.

About seven years ago, the Arizona Commerce Authority began a series of workforce studies and research primarily focused on gathering data of workforce and employment needs and wants within the broader sectors of Arizona's industries. This work continued when the workforce group was later repositioned within a new government entity called the Office of Economic Opportunity, which, overly simplified, is like our state's Department of Labor.

Our governor, Doug Ducey, is a former business leader, entrepreneur, and employer. Within his first year of office, Governor Ducey organized a council of experts and leaders to address the issue of what many call the skills gap, the fundamental rift between the skills that employers rely upon in their employees and the skill that jobseekers possess.

About four years ago, sustained by a partnership of numerous state agencies, our office began the process of developing a career readiness program that would culminate in a validation of skills employers wanted. We capitalized on what was at the point three years of data and research from our own strategy labs and plentiful reports across the country in recent years.

Other states had previously developed what they called career readiness programs, which assessed foundational work-related academic skills. However, our employers had specifically emphasized the need for essential professional skills, the soft skills we're discussing today.

As a result, our career readiness validation program had what had to be called a two-pinned approach, or at least that's what I call it. Here's what the two pins mean.

Imagine you're attacking something important on your bulletin board. One simple pin at the top of the paper into the cork would leave it vulnerable to twisting and turning and even a slight breeze, and a good wind would rip it right off the board. A second pin at the bottom provides a secure hold on it.

Arizona had to have a career ready validation with such a two-pinned approach, validating both the foundational workplace academic skills and the essential professional skills.

Along with two layers of career ready validation, Arizona required a few other features from our delivery platform in order to meet our standard of excellence. Our platform would need to be career contextualized to simulate on-the-job experiences and application, have a Spanish option, provide online assessment, and have flexible partner integration as we intended to distribute the service among multiple implementation associations.

We did not have the capacity nor the mandate to, so to speak, reinvent the wheel by building a career readiness delivery platform from scratch. We selected a vendor when learning, as they offered several key differentiators, among which were a customized approach.

They listened throughout development as a partner. They offered continuous development as standard, adjusting as technology progresses, updating the content, and meeting changing demands as times change. And boy, did times change recently.

They offered both online instruction development and/or offline in-person instruction mentoring and when learning aligned with the Arizona Department of Education's career and college readiness professional skill standards and the adult education standards.

So, Arizona is unique in the United States and has set a new bar in validating career readiness by invoking the professional skills assessment. These soft skills, both in our learning content and in the assessment, can be summarized into subtopics that I like to call the four C's.

Yeah. I know it's supposed to be seven C's, but these are the letter C, collaboration and teamwork, effective communication, critical thinking and problem solving, conveying professionalism such as attitude, punctuality, integrity, and organization.

As I mentioned earlier briefly, we offered two options for soft skill development as preparation for our assessment. The online approach is a format of pretests, learning content videos, interactive checks for understanding, and post-test with progress measures in the form of e-badges or digital badges, hours on task, and reports downloadable to Excel.

The offline soft skills development approach is individually customized by our implementation partners using any number of selections from hundreds of pages of content organized within our subtopics, the four C's I was talking about before, including workplace scenario instruction, self-assessments, formative assessments, and post-tests.

Our career readiness assessments are held exclusively online, and out of necessity due to the concerns with COVID-19, we developed a breakthrough system of virtual proctoring that uses enhanced testing protocols and allows proctoring the assessments through video conferencing when those protocols are met.

Our professional skills assessments or assessment is exclusively a pass or no pass outcome with a high test score for passing. The other three foundational workplace academic assessments are leveled scores based on difficulty, as is done in most states. Once again, though, the full credential is not earned without passing the professional skills assessment.

Results for our career readiness assessments are available immediately after completion, both to the administrator and proctor, as well as the test taker, which have their own dashboards and portals for their information. Upon completing the full battery of assessments, those who pass have their certificate available in their user portal on demand featuring the governor's signature, the great seal of Arizona, their scores, and a unique certificate serial number that may be authenticated for employers and our office.

As planned from the beginning, Arizona career readiness program reaches a wide variety of individuals because of its approach. Listed here are some 13 categories of implementation partners, though there could be more. The slide was full. So, I stopped trying to name them all.

Over the three-plus years since we launched our program, thousands of Arizonans and even a few others that seek employment outside of Arizona have earned this credential or at least the professional skills certificate. We have trained hundreds of proctors among the various implementation partners, as well as routing much of our proctoring through our special videoconferencing approach now.

Additionally, over 500 employment locations have recognized this career ready program across Arizona. The key here, as we see it, is that Arizona career readiness program brings the best workforce possible to our employers and opens up the most options possible for validating the skills of our workforce.

So, for some tips for success in launching a successful soft skills development and assessment program is you research the employers and determine what they deem important. Consult with implementation partners to hone in on a best approach, and determine priorities for key content, delivery features, and what will reach a broad base.

And we'll – as we said before, we'll take care of questions later, and I turn my time back over to Pam.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you so much, Andy. Very informative.

So, we – now, we have another poll. What is your familiarity with digital badges? I'm an expert, I'm familiar but want to learn more, I've heard the term but couldn't define it, and a digital what?

So, let me see here. Third – about a third are familiar but want to learn more. A quarter have said they've heard the term but couldn't define it, and about a third are saying what? Okay.

So, you will hear people refer to digital badges, and I think our next presenter is going to talk about that as well. So, hopefully, we'll learn more right now from Luke Dowden. Thank you, Luke. Take it away.

LUKE DOWDEN: Good afternoon, everyone. It's really nice to be with you today. I am Dr. Luke Dowden. I'm from the Alamo Colleges District in San Antonio, Texas.

A little bit about us. We're a very large community college district located in Bexar County. We have five independently accredited community colleges. All are Hispanic serving institutions, and one is also a historically black college and that's St. Philip's College. And you can also see we serve our community not only through our colleges but through our regional and neighborhood centers.

This is our why. So, why are we invested in the work of marketable skills? Why have we been doing this work for three years now? It's to really serve our students. And I won't read all of the elements of this profile, but I'll just – I'll call out to you that 60 percent of our roughly 100,000 students, 70 percent of those are in credit programs, are housing insecure. 48 percent are food insecure. And so, we want to make sure that our students can be the most competitive possible in the job market.

So, what is a digital badge? I'm glad that we had – we do have some experts and I'm happy to connect with you experts that responded to the poll. But in terms of a digital badge, it is an image with metadata. It's not a digital sticker. So, I would say that to you. The other thing I would say to you is that the digital badge gets a lot of interest, but it's just the thing that represents the skill.

That's the most important part; right, are the skills and our ability to give another portable credential to your learners, whether they be youth or adults, to – something that they can use to be more competitive in the job market.

So, this is our mission. We're focused on creating opportunities for students to earn verified digital badges that articulate in-demand marketable skills. We're very – we believe that these will help our students be more socially and economically mobile and especially in a world where there's a greater use of AI in hiring and a move to skills-based hiring. For students to be able to surface and articulate and speak to the skills that they may have is very important.

We use three guiding principles in our marketable skills training work. It needs to be competency-based. They actually need to represent marketable skills as defined by whatever competency framework that you or we've aligned to and that credentialed faculty and staff members or trainers are actually – are prepared to do those assessments.

I would say to you that we for several years now have worked on – I'm sorry. Something keeps happening with advancing the slide.

So, we've worked for several years now with the Education Design Lab on implementing their 21st Century Skills Framework. It has eight skills. Each skill has four sub-competencies. You can see how there are some overlap among those sub-competencies. Each of those sub-competencies have an assessment. So, there's an alignment to those assessments.

The Education Design Lab does provide a toolkit. We were early adopters of the toolkit. So, I want to say to you that we've bootstrapped a lot of this. There is an opportunity for you to not do that. So – but we were early adopters and have done a lot of work there.

I'm going to talk about just one piece of our work. So, we've got a lot of different projects that we're involved there. I saw some community colleges join, and I'm happy to connect with you afterwards or any other groups that are interested. But this work – Course Plus Badge was inspired by our work with Goodwill Industries, San Antonio. And I think there's a colleague of mine from Goodwill San Antonio on the call with us.

We had worked with them on a mega badge called skills booster, and I think there's a link to a story about us in the weblinks that are available to you. And what we wanted to do was to begin to integrate marketable skills into our curriculum, working with all five of our colleges. Could we help students better surface their skills?

We were teaching lots of skills and different work ready programs, workforce programs, anything from customer service to home management. But could students surface and talk about those marketable skills?

So, we I just want to say to you, I'm proud of the work because we've just – we – last summer at this time, these trainings did not exist. So, we have two different trainings that we provide to faculty, staff, and others external to us, badge coaches, if you're going to be facilitating a marketable skills training that leads to a credential that's already created. We train people to do that.

And badge specialist is the credential that a faculty member receives after they've gone through that 10-week training we saw on the previous slide, has integrated the sub-competencies of a skill into their course or has helped to highlight those better and have made some adjustments to those all-important assessments.

We also have expanded our work. We're offering this summer a free pilot to our community for the most in-demand skills. We looked at three industries in San Antonio, and regardless of what we saw, regardless of the industry, the in-demand marketable skills or soft skills were the same. So, we are – we're also testing out this model where they're not just integrated into a credit course, but they're training that's out and available.

Again, using the materials and information provided by Education Design Lab, we're highly customizing and building out these experiences in our learning management system.

We're using a product called Badgr. There are other products. Credibly [ph] is another one, but we're using Badgr. We're partnered with them to actually deliver the badge. This is an example of what an employer would see for if a student was to share a badge in their e-portfolio or LinkedIn on a resume. This is some evidence here.

What I like about the feature there at the bottom, you'll see skills. If our students are to click on that, they can see all of the jobs in the United States that value, for this example, intercultural fluency.

So, in just nine months – so, last summer, we had a pilot and four faculty members. We had 12 faculty members in the fall, 37 in the spring. We're working with about 30 right now. So, just for Course Plus Badge, this is the work we've done so far. You can see from fall to spring we've doubled our number of skills badges earned by our students.

We've got 54 faculty who are now badge specialists, and this is just the gift that keeps on giving; right? We believe that the work that we're doing, the training we're providing is very sustainable. We're teaching faculty how to fish, if you will, how to create those marketable skills learning experiences or elevate those in their courses. And we expect that we'll see rapid expansion next year. We have 32 badge coaches that are prepared to support our standalone badge work that we showed you a little bit earlier.

Just to give you an idea of the work – and it takes a lot of internal partners. So, we – we'll talk to you about partnering. I'm assuming that a lot of you value and understand the importance of partnership. But we have a lot of internal partners that we work with to make our marketable skills digital badges a reality and as well as a number of external collaborators.

And there's a lot of good work going on. If you're workforce, you're in K-12, this is – these are some of the groups that we work with that you may want to partner with as well or you may also be working with. But those external collaborations are just so important.

Since we implemented the Education Design Lab's 21st Century Skill Framework, they've developed a platform that's a lot easier for you to adopt. We're not using that platform; right, because we have a lot of investment in the work that we've done. But the folks at Education Design Lab would be able to talk to you about the platform and how easy it is for you to stand up and access it and begin to implement it if you're interested.

So, this is their platform, vsbl. You'll have access to the slides afterwards and so will want to – you may want to explore this, if you don't have the resources or aren't in a position where you want to develop this internally.

Just some tips of success for me and what we learned. Definitely resource the effort. I'm fortunate that I'm a chief online learning officer, and so we've had some resources to put towards this.

Creating good examples has always been a part of my philosophy. We did that early on. We had our faculty share with other faculty, and we continue to follow that model. Investing in technology that's not only affordable but interoperable. You want to have something that works across a lot of systems. The other thing that I would say to you is just keep designing for your learner. I showed you our learner and our profile. Continue that work.

And some things that aren't on the slide that I'll say to you is partner with your local community college. We want to work with you. We want to work on skills development. Certainly, if you're in Texas in San Antonio, I want to work with you. But I would say that most community colleges around the nation would welcome an opportunity to partner with you on marketable skills training.

And the final thing I'll say, back to a point that Amanda made, another tool, if you're struggling with how do we have this conversation with employers about which skills we should focus on, there's a tool called a T Profile. So, the T Profile. We successfully used it when we started our badge work. It was a way for us to have a conversation with employers about the most in-demand skills in their hardest to fill jobs. And so, I would just offer that as a bonus content.

And I'll hand it back over to Pam. I appreciate the opportunity to share a little bit with you today about some of the work we're doing in marketable skills digital badges at the Alamo Colleges District in San Antonio, Texas.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you so much, Luke. Yes. That's a lot of information to take in and – but we are providing links and you'll have the PowerPoint afterwards.

So, our next poll is, as we return to normal after COVID-19, will your organization continue its virtual service offering? Yeah. Looks like the vast majority of you say yes. It does seem like this has turned out to be a good way to keep in touch with people and maybe even broaden our audience, people who have transportation issues. So, I'm really glad to see this response.

And now, I want to turn it over to Terri Cooley-Taylor. Thank you, Terri.

TERRI COOLEY-TAYLOR: Good afternoon. My name is Terri Cooley-Taylor, and I'm the EARN Program supervisor for the Washington Greene County Job Training Agency. The Washington Greene County Job Training Agency is located in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, which is just south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

So, our program provides assistance to TANF participants with employment and training opportunities. To just give you an example of a typical EARN client, majority of them are female, 20 to 30 years old, single parents, several barriers to employment, possibly mental health, drug, and alcohol, legal. A lot of them have limited to no work experience, limited to no education, and the majority of our EARN participants come into the program with very low confidence and low self-esteem.

So, in 2015, we were looking for a soft skills assessment program, and we came across Conover Online. In 2015, the job market was employer driven, meaning that a lot of our candidates were going out, and they were competing against other jobseekers that had more experience and more training than them. And they were coming back self-defeated, and we thought we needed to find something that would give them that competitive edge.

And as the workforce colleagues, you know that 85 percent of employers are looking for soft skills rather than experience and education. So, we thought, to make our participants more employable, we're going to purchase Conover Online. We searched and found that it was a tool that not only assesses soft skills, but in trains and develops those soft skills. So, maybe you have a population that you are dealing with right now that is similar to the TANF population that we are dealing with.

So, Conover Online is a research-based assessment and training system for the soft skills needed in the workplace and many times life. It's skill building, and it's social-emotional development.

The EARN program uses the workplace readiness part of the Conover Online system. This workplace readiness part of the program focuses on three areas that are necessary for job placement and job retention, job readiness, job seeking, and job keeping.

So, as you can see here, the job readiness competencies are everything as an employer. If you're a manager, you're definitely looking for all of these attributes when you're looking for someone for a new job. And the job seeking, many of you might be working at a One-Stop. These are those hard skills that we're training for every day, the job search, the resume, the interviewing. So, it has a lot of all the skills that a jobseeker needs.

And, of course, the job keeping skills. We are a federally funded program, and if we get our participants a job, we definitely want them to keep that job. And it's very important we're dealing with employers. We want them to not only hire one of our participants but many of our participants. So, we need to send them quality candidates. So, the job keeping skills is probably the most important part of it all. Getting off on the right foot, getting along in the workplace, and performance reviews, very important. Performance reviews is understanding the criticism or the goal setting that your supervisor sets for you.

Okay. So, let me just go over a little bit about the how the participant would go through the system. So, how it begins is a pre-assessment. The student is pre-assessed on their strengths and their weaknesses.

Now, I kind of say this is a conversation starter. You identify strengths, but you really celebrate them. A lot of our participants never knew they had these strengths. So, you really need to promote these strengths and let them know they have them. You can go over those weaknesses, but everybody talks about their weaknesses. But a lot of these individuals never knew they had these strengths, and it's a real motivator.

Then the system automatically assigns them training videos from that pre-assessment. So, those training videos explain the competencies, and then gain knowledge. Then they take an assessment, and they see that they have learned all those competencies.

And then the best part, they receive certificates throughout the process, and it's positive reinforcement throughout the assessment and training. They get a constant pat on the back. They're building confidence, and it gives them motivation to move on to the next part.

I can tell you from experience, I personalized these certificates, printed them out, signed them, handed them to one of our participants, several of them, and they would have the biggest smile on their face. And they would say to me, I'm going to hand this to my family and show them tonight what I accomplished today. And you knew that that certificate was going to go up on the refrigerator. So, it's a real motivator to keep moving in a program.

So, just to tell you how we used the program, from 2015 to March of 2020, we used it as a hybrid model, and we did not use it with every jobseeker that we had. Many of our participants, we felt, had too many barriers to employment and weren't "job ready." So, only the job ready clients went into Conover in our job club, and in the job club, they would talk about topics and their struggles and successes and achieving the goals. And it was really successful.

But when the pandemic hit, then we had to go to virtual only. And it seemed like a seamless transition to go to a virtual mode, and Conover was perfect for us. We had it right in our back pocket, and we could use it. We started using it with every single client that we had because it was the only thing that we had online only, and it worked for us perfectly.

Many of our clients had children that had to do school work during the day. This program could be used with any device at any time of the day so they could do their activities whenever they needed to and get credit for that. The feedback that we got from the clients was excellent. They all enjoyed it, even the ones that we would not consider ready.

So, coming back to the office now, we are going to go back to hybrid, but we're going to use it for everybody because we've learned from that experience that it is good for all of our clients, just not for the "job ready" ones. And reaching our performance benchmarks, it's a win-win, win for the client and win for us. We're reaching job placement. We're – and job retention. We always exceed our job retention. So, if you're a federally funded program, it's a good tool to have.

Tips for success. Definitely for us it was the date time stamp when a participant logs in and logs out of the program. We have to keep track of their attendance. So that was perfect for us. And it easily tracked their achievements, and it lets the client know, oh, look. Look how much I've achieved.

Customer service, they have a great chat feature that gives you immediate responses for your staff. It's excellent. And staff training. There's prerecorded resources. There's printed materials for your teachers. There's so much that I haven't even seen. Staff webinars, Conover gives staff webinars monthly. Customized trainings, if there's something that you feel that's not already established, they'll create something for you. So, it's a great tool to use for soft skills for a particular population. And that's the end of my slides. Thank you.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you. Thank you, Terri. I went too far there.

Questions now. Okay. I'm going to try and sort of rotate the questions among our four speakers, but I wanted to just address there was one about costs. And I think the thing is the costs are going to vary depending on if you're doing a statewide implementation or a local implementation or who your customers are. I think – and we're going to talk later about how you can find out more information. So, I think we won't ask each of them to talk about that since it may be specific to their own situation.

But, Amanda, "Does the rubric model come with this tool that you that you're using, or did your group develop that rubric yourself?"

MS. DANIELS: So, GPS Education Partners developed the on-the-job rubric, and that was our base point. But PAIRIN does provide for each of the 102 skills a performance rubric. So, certainly, you could use those rubrics created by PAIRIN to help inform what it might look like on the job. And I would strongly suggest that as the PAIRIN rubrics are not in business partner language. They're definitely in classroom coaching language.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thanks, Amanda.

So, Andy, we have a question about whether Arizona's career readiness program includes youth with disabilities. "Is it accessible? And do special educators know about this assessment and learning program?" You might be on mute, Andy. Are you there, Andy? If not –

MR. RIDLEY: Okay. Are you hearing me now?

MS. FRUGOLI: Yes. Now, we can.

MR. RIDLEY: Okay. I'm not sure if you heard anything I said before. I wanted to say the quick answer to that is yes. The WIN Learning that we use offers all of the special needs and availability access and accommodations for any situation. And depending on the training of the proctor, that's how we handle the accessibility for people with special needs. And let me add that this would be for youth or adult, in schools, out of schools, et cetera.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you. Thank you, Andy.

Luke, they're saying, "What badges would you recommend in particular for recent college graduates, if there's a distinction?"

DR. DOWDEN: I have two sons that are in college, and so, I've had a chance to actually think about this quite a bit. And I know they asked college graduates, but I think it's true for high school graduates.

What we're seeing across industries, right, are high-demand, high-wage jobs, oral communication; right? So, can you speak clearly? Can you listen actively? Do you have appropriate tone and word choice? Written communication. Can you – do you have some of those skills? And then teamwork. Teamwork and collaboration is very important because not many jobs you're just in isolation. There are some; right? There are research jobs. There are other type of highly specialized and technical.

But those would be the three, Pam, that I would offer if someone – but, again, at the end of the day offer this example. If you're talking to your business and your industry partners, and you heard that from all of our presenters, using a tool like the T Profile to ask them and to verify. But those would be the three I would offer, but I would say always verify with your partners.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you, Luke.

And Terri, I think there's a question about, "During COVID, did you see gains among all clients using the platform, including those that you identified had barriers to employment? And how was that measured?" That might be a tough question. Do you feel okay with that?

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: Well, we talked about – I talked about this with my staff. And definitely prior to COVID, we saw major gains. During COVID, they just were stable. Everybody stayed stable and stayed participating, which was the best we could do was everyone participated and stayed in the program and stayed in contact with us. We didn't lose anyone. So, that was the best part of all.

MS. FRUGOLI: That's good to hear. Thank you.

I see there's a question about, "Which of these programs have training videos?" Maybe we can just go around. Amanda, does yours have videos, the one you use?

MS. DANIELS: PAIRIN does not have videos. It does have interactive slide shows that are accessible, and so they work with screen readers and captioning tools.

MS. FRUGOLI: And, Andy, do you use videos in your program?

MR. RIDLEY: Yes. Actually, WIN Learning has training videos, along with manuals that you could read for further training, a big amount of reference and resources for training. And, also, we have individually trained our partners and implementation groups that we've worked with in person, but that training videos and and resources are available in the platform for the administrators to use any time and refer back to.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. Luke, do you have video as part of your package?

DR. DOWDEN: There a part of our learning experience. So, they're weaved into the learning activities that are built up to those different assessments that students or learners have to submit.

MS. FRUGOLI: And, Terri, do you have videos as part of your program?

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: Yes. With Conover, part of the program is videos. And I didn't mention this, but we – during COVID, one of our students had low literacy, and we were – we're not sure if she could do the program. And we checked with the Conover and it read to her. We did not know that the program could do that. So, now, we have that tool that we can use. So, if anyone has low literacy, the program will read to them. So, that barrier was removed.

MS. FRUGOLI: Good. And that's a good accommodation as well.

And so, since you brought this up, one question was, "Is there anything targeted to English language learner?"

I know that Andy mentioned that they have a Spanish version of their tool. Does anyone else have something? I don't know. Perhaps, Luke, have you worked with English language learners.

DR. DOWDEN: We have but for other projects. Not this one. So, that work is running in a different department, Pam.

MS. FRUGOLI: I see. Okay. We have a lot of questions. I'm having a hard time.

Do all four of you – I know Luke has mentioned badges, and I know Andy mentioned something like that. Amanda or Terri, do you have badges that are – or I know there's a certificate; right?

MS. DANIELS: I'll speak for PAIRIN.

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: This is Terri. We have a certificate.

MS. DANIELS: Oh, sorry, Terri. Go ahead.

MS. FRUGOLI: Amanda, go first. Sorry.

MS. DANIELS: Okay. Thank you. So, GPS Education Partners have certificates that say the students have demonstrated the proficiency on the job. But PAIRIN has digital badges through Acclaim Fresh Credibly [ph] – they're the same product right now because of a buyout – that indicate a student has completed the curriculum. So, it's sort of a twofold process.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. Thanks. Sorry, Terri, that I didn't – so, go ahead. Answer now, please.

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: It's okay. Conover has certificates of completion of each module.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. Thank you.

We have a question here. "Do any of these resources have diversity, sensitivity, bias, or inclusion training?" I'm wondering – I'm not sure if that – you mean that's for the faculty and coaches or for individuals as part of their soft skills. Does anyone want to address that one?

MR. RIDLEY: This is Andy. I'll jump in. At least for the learner of the soft skills in the WIN program that Arizona uses. There are definitely sensitivity and diversity training in units.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay.

DR. DOWDEN: And I would say for one of the eight badges that are – or eight skills, intercultural fluency includes the sub-competencies of self-awareness, incorporate diverse perspectives, and challenge cultural bias. So, that's definitely a part – three sub-competencies that are assessed as a part of that marketable skill.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. I do see there's a question about seeing live demos of the program. We're going to give you some information at the end about where you can find out more information, and I'm sure that you will be able to see live demos from the offers.

There's a question for Luke. "How do you suggest colleges and universities incorporate soft skills training in addition to the traditional curriculum requirements?" How did you work with that?

DR. DOWDEN: I would say integrate it into your courses as much as possible, which is what we've tried to do. When that's not possible, Wichita State University has got a great example of credit bearing skills courses that they're providing to their community and to their students. Some – so, things that run alongside of your credit programs, giving your students a chance to earn noncredit certificates while they earn their credit courses.

So, there's a lot of unique combinations. Integrate it as much as possible, when you can. Students don't tend to do optional, but if not, Wichita State has got a really good model that I think is replicable.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. Hold on. "Did any of you run into issues with digital literacy among participants being unfamiliar with using the technology? And if so, how did you handle that?" I don't know if someone wants to indicate they'd like to take that.

MR. RIDLEY: Well, I'm always quick on the gun here. This is Andy, again, to talk about the Arizona program. We have actually looked into that because of some evidence that came across with our approach with having a virtual proctoring process. We then asked our vendor WIN Learning to investigate the concept, too, about a digital literacy program, perhaps parallel to our soft skills and foundational academic skills. And they quickly responded. I believe that their first level of basic digital literacy is going to be released within the next month for those that desire to add that to their program.

MS. FRUGOLI: Right. That – (inaudible).

MR. RIDLEY: I'm excited about that.

MS. FRUGOLI: Great. That definitely became an important issue during the past year when we had to move to many virtual platforms.

And I believe I remember that Terri said that you moved people to virtual and that they were able to even access it on any device; is that correct, Terri?

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: Yes. They were able to access it on their phone, iPad. Their children had iPads for schooling, and whatever they could use. If they had to go to a hot spot, they used it on a hot spot on their phone. In our – the Conover system was very easy for them to use it, walked them through each step. Very little to no issues with the clients being able to use it, which was great.

MS. FRUGOLI: Great. So, there's also a question sort of for the whole panel. "Have employers provided feedback on your program efforts? Are graduates of your program doing better than other new employees or better than your previous cohorts of graduates?" I don't know. Some of you have had these things for a while. I don't know if – I don't know. Amanda, do you have something you want to say about employer response?

MS. DANIELS: Sure. I'll say Generic Power Systems is a national company we work with, and they have had our students for more than 20 years. We've been implementing the PAIRIN program, our personal development program, for five. And it was so successful that they have come to us as part of their HR talent and development program asking, how can we use this system with our employees? So, they want to look at it for a tool for internal development. It's absolutely been very, very popular. I think that's key. What are your employers saying?

DR. DOWDEN: Pam, I would say this. A few challenges we ran into is that, when you're working with a business and industry partners – we found this in a couple of instances – is the employees that benefit most are the frontline workers, and they're the ones whose time is hardest to acquire; right?

We were fortunate in our work with Goodwill, pre-COVID, they were paying their employees two hours a week to work on marketable skill. That – and so, there are some models, but it's very tough to get to those frontline workers because they're so essential to the core business of – business and industry that we're partnering with.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you, Luke.

MR. RIDLEY: Pam, this is Andy, if I could go ahead. Studies across the country over the years have shown that career readiness programs improve in three specific areas, onboarding and hiring and retention and also in workers' compensation.

So, one of our companies in Arizona that adopted our program did a study over a year, and they had declining retention rate at that point. And over the one year incorporating our program, they improved their retention from 71 percent to 92 percent.

Another one of our large employers – I'm not saying a huge employer, but one of our municipal employers of a city in Arizona is using our program for their current workers for promotion opportunities. They need to earn our credential in order to be promoted. And so, we're excited about how employers are using this program.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. That sort of leads me into a related question. Someone asked about, "What soft skills training platform would be best for seasoned and experienced jobseekers?"

But it sounds like several of you have already mentioned that the hardest part is maybe getting their time away from the job, but that you have used – they have been used with workers.

And there's the question about how to talk about soft skills, and I believe one of you mentioned that, instead of just saying I'm a people person, I'm good with people, how to talk more fully about that. Any of you want to – can you address that? It's sort of a multi –

MS. DANIELS: This is Amanda from GPS. And, when you do the assessment of a client, you get in, you log in, you take the assessment, and the first thing that pops up after you complete your assessment is, what are your strengths and how should you market those? So, we talked to you about what are the positives that those strengths bring to the workplace.

So, PAIRIN the tool provides that, but as part of our interview skills that we do with all of our participants, that's another place that we hit it. So, if you provide coaching services, PAIRIN has tools for the coach, that would allow you to better speak to, how do I bring this up in an interview and how do I use examples along the way to really sell those skills?

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you, Amanda. Anyone else want to chime in on that, or I can go to the next question?

So, there's a question about whether any of these programs have an offline option for those who are currently incarcerated but approved release and want to increase their soft skills abilities. And I don't know. Have any of you actually used any of these programs with incarcerated individuals?

MR. RIDLEY: This is Andy, again, in Arizona. We have definitely used it with incarcerated individuals and depending on whether they have some limited access. But I understand also that WIN is developing a system that will allow the – their material to be downloaded to a database and then used that way, rather than through live internet access. But also, there is offline material in the WIN system that many of our partners use, and I'm happy to say that we've had hundreds of incarcerated individuals earn our credential over the past two and a half years that they've been implementing it.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you, Andy.

Yes. And I just want to mention that there are some prisons that are bringing in tablets so that – they have content on them, but they don't have any external internet links so that you can't use it to communicate outside. And, actually, our own careeronestop.org website has a site for incarcerated individuals, and that has been loaded onto some of those tablets that are offered in various prison systems. So, that is something. And it's good to know that the soft skills assessment could also be done that way as well.

Okay. It's saying, for the badges – the question is, "For the badges and micro-credentials, how does the college pay for these, for the service so that the badge doesn't disappear? How do – (inaudible) – to approve these credentials?"

DR. DOWDEN: Yeah. So, I think they're asking a technical question, Pam. So, I'll give that response and then maybe another is – first, I made the point on my slides about making sure your technology is affordable and interoperable.

So, our partnership with Badgr isn't depending on us always having a partnership with Badgr. It is for our access to certain information, but they're built on open badge standards. And the students have a – or learners have a virtual backpack that's actually built on Mozilla Firefox technology. So, it stays with them. It moves with them. They own the badge. We award it, and it's out there.

So, the interoperability of the technology and asking that question when you're partnering with the vendor is very important. It's a very good question to ask. So, Pam, that would be my response.

In terms of – (inaudible) – proofing, the second half of that, make sure you're working with partners that are aligning to groups like Credential Engine that are creating repositories of shared micro-credentials, which digital badges are a type of micro-credential. So, I would offer that as well.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you, Luke.

I'm trying to – oh, there is one question about retirees wanting to get back into the field. Have any of you had experience using this with retirees or older workers who may have been out of the labor force for a while and have wanted to come back in?

MR. RIDLEY: Well, Arizona certainly has. I don't keep a database of the age of the users, but I know anecdotally many people who have communicated with me about – especially during COVID with maybe nothing else to do, a lot of seniors and/or retirees have taken an interest in new career opportunities and how to hedge against the fact of the potential for bias on age. The career readiness credential that we offer can show an employer that they are still right there ready to work and capable.

MS. FRUGOLI: Great. Thank you, Andy.

I see a question about, "Do some tools help convince adults that their soft skills are deficient but they are less than willing to hear that from a provider?"

I think someone talked about using it in job clubs. Sometimes it's easier to hear it from your peers. Anyone want to talk about that? What do you do if they react to – and I know someone else talked about emphasizing and celebrating the strengths, but what do you do about addressing weaknesses that are identified?

MS. COOLEY-TAYLOR: This is Terri. Yes. We use it in job club, and it is a lot easier to talk about it with your peers and kind of recognizing that you have them and what you're going to do to overcome them and the steps that you'll take and that it's a process. And working with your case manager, plus working with your peers, but having that job club atmosphere plus having the system that – in the training tool that gives you the knowledge behind it, that teaches you the competency so you understand, when you get into that job club, what you're really talking about helps.

MS. FRUGOLI: Thank you. So, do – oh, was someone else wanting to offer something?

DR. DOWDEN: I was just going to follow up with what Terri said and say, I think the language is very important, Pam. With our training opportunities, it's either about surfacing something a person already has or helping them to learn along the way, right, and gain some level of competence. We're not saying you've mastered it. So, I think the language is important as well.

MS. FRUGOLI: Okay. I'm going to wrap up with one last question before we go to next steps, and I think you've touched on this, if there's more you want to say, but do you have actual employers who endorse these credentials or that request them? And how many employers in your areas? Is it more than one? Andy, do you –

MR. RIDLEY: This is Andy. In Arizona, we have posted on our website those employers that have acknowledged an understanding and acceptance of our program. And that does include that some of those employers literally seek us out and we then go to them to explain how the program works.

MS. FRUGOLI: Great. Okay. Thank you. All right.

DR. DOWDEN: Yeah. And, Pam, our best example is Goodwill San Antonio. 1400 pre–pandemic. We also worked very closely with H-E-B, which is a very large grocer chain when we were launching our digital badges work. So, they were essential to our early success and our ongoing success.

MS. FRUGOLI: All right. Thank you very much. I'm going to wrap up the questions just because, again, we've heard from four presenters but – and heard a lot of information.

But we just want to give you some guidance on – for those of you who are going to want to then look into this for yourself, some of the next steps you can look at the foundational competencies in the Department of Labor, the building blocks model, and also at that link that we showed you that compares to different frameworks of employability skills at education.

But then you want to think about your own criteria. What have you identified either in your state or your region that are the skills that employers are demanding or that you're seeing that your customers need? Conduct some of your own research on the various tools, and I'll show you in a minute a way to help do that. And get help from experts who can advise you.

So, here are some criteria that you might consider when choosing between tools. Who is the target audience and who – as you've seen, our presenters today work with different populations. Do you see organizations or target populations listed in the chase study that these tools offer? What skills do they assess? As you can see, some of them assess a really large number of skills or competencies that you can choose from, and some have a more refined subset.

And then you can look at cost. But I think you do need to explore that. And I think some of these tools are low cost and some are higher costs, and it also depends on the package you decide to go with; right? Are there add-on features? Can this be bundled with other assessments or products?

And think about who you want to partner with to implement the tool. If you're a workforce system, can you partner, as Luke suggested, with the local community college or with a service agency, a nonprofit?

So, we – in the process of doing the environmental scan, we also came across this nonprofit organization called the National College Transition Network, and they have a curated collection of resources to teach and assess soft skills. It includes both free and subscription-based resources. That helps with the cost idea. And you can search by the audience served, by cost, format, type of resource, whether it includes curriculum, badging, has its own assessment, has its own framework of skills.

And it describes the content, key takeaways, and links for every resource. And they have a personal and workplace success skills library. And that link, I believe, is also in the web links of the chat.

But, in addition, right now, for organizations that are looking to implement – select and implement a resource, they are providing the national – NCTN is providing free technical assistance to help you select resources that fit your customers' needs and your program goals and work with you to implement the resource for two to four months following a plan that you would develop with staff, including coaching, skill training, and job readiness workshops.

And then they would do this so that they can have a case study write-up that would be posted to this library, and it's possible that you could receive even a stipend to do this work. So, there's a link there, and I hope this link is also in the web link, that if you want to find out more about that, you can do so.

And in addition, I believe – we're going to ask if our presenters are – will be willing to share their contact information, and we can post that when the webinar is posted to WorkforceGPS. So, if you want to follow up with specific questions, if they're available, their email will be listed.

So, I want to thank everyone for participating. We hope you've learned a lot. We are appreciative of our presenters, Amanda, Andy, Luke, and Terri, and for all of your participation. Thank you.

(END)