

Roadmap for Inclusion

A Collaborative Digital Skills
Training Model for Young Adults with
Developmental Disabilities



MOODY'S
FOUNDATION


Cooke
School and Institute

Abstract

This paper presents a roadmap to guide educators and business to create a collaborative digital skills training program with the goal of improving employment among a broader segment of young adults with disabilities than has been realized through existing neurodiversity initiatives.

To identify new talent, a growing group of IT companies and other businesses have created neurodiversity inclusion initiatives to recruit people with disabilities; over the last 10 years, companies such as SAP, Microsoft and DXC (formerly Hewlett Packard) have developed these programs, and their growth continues to gain traction. While initially focused on recruiting people with autism, the potential for people with a variety of disabilities, including developmental disabilities, to fill support roles in several IT and Information Management support jobs, is now being considered. This white paper examines the need for a digital skills for the workplace program for people with developmental disabilities. Cooke School and Institute and Moody's Foundation are proposing a new collaborative workforce model that combines a digital

skills training program with applied internship experiences to prepare young adults with developmental disabilities to take on IT and Information Management support roles. This model can be adapted and used to suit the needs of a wide variety of young adults with developmental disabilities, preparing some for a range of entry-level digital jobs (e.g. assistant / support staff) using basic productivity software programs, while having the potential to identify prospects for more advanced IT skill development (e.g., junior software developer, network administrator support staff). In order to fully realize the benefits of inclusion—financial independence for workers, positive shifts in workplace culture, and innovation arising from diverse perspectives—educational institutions and business partners must work together.

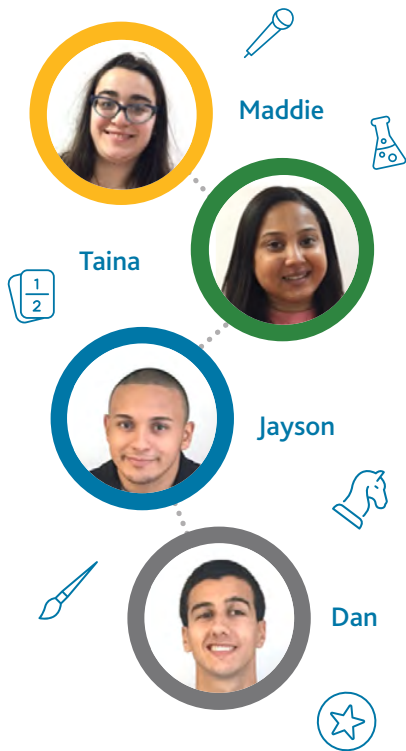
ABOUT COOKE SCHOOL AND INSTITUTE

The Cooke School and Institute is a non-sectarian, non-profit private provider of special education services in New York City, offering a school for students ages 5 through 21, with teacher coaching and training services. Cooke School divisions include the Lower School, Middle School and Upper School (K-12) and Transitions, a program for adults ages 18-21. Cooke also has an active Alumni Association. The Cooke Institute

partners with UPK, public, non-public and charter schools to impact the learning of some 6,000 students through its teacher coaching and training activities. Cooke envisions a world in which all people with special needs are included as valued members of their communities, leading independent and purposeful lives.



Introduction



Meet Maddie, Taina, Jayson and Dan: four young adults who attend the Cooke School and Institute, a school for students (Kindergarten to age 21) with special needs. Many of these students have been with Cooke since they were young children. As they progressed through high school, they may have needed additional support for learning tasks, but in the end, they were more similar to other teenagers than they were different. They progressed through every milestone—first crushes, senior prom, cheerleading practice, first jobs. Their parents will tell you that they spent too much time on their phone, asked for too much money to buy sneakers and ate enough pizza for two lifetimes!

Now, as young adults, they want what all young adults want: a future. They want a job, an apartment, a social life. But, even though they share a dozen or more similarities with other young adults across New York City, they face one exceptional hurdle in their quest for independence. They are all people with disabilities, and they will all struggle to find a job that allows them to showcase their own particular talents.

The transition from high school to college or work is very different for young adults with disabilities than it is for their peers without disabilities. High school graduation

is typically a time of great promise, when students contemplate their post-secondary options. They ask themselves: Should I go to college? Should I take a year off and travel? Should I get a job and start to build a career? How about a trade school or going into the military? Most high school graduates have at least one of these options as they transition to adulthood. For students with disabilities, the path to independence is much more daunting. Once a person with a disability ages out of special education, usually by age 22, they typically lose the safety net of the educational system and government benefits that protect a child's right to a free, appropriate public education.

They enter a time in their life where there is fear and uncertainty about the future as they approach what some have called the "Disability Cliff."¹ The "Disability Cliff" refers to the gap in government entitlement services and educational options once a child ages out of special education and enters a more complex system of government services for adults. It is at this precarious moment, that many people with disabilities face some of their harshest obstacles, but it's also a time when businesses and post-secondary educational institutions potentially stand to gain the most from fostering inclusion.



Young adults with disabilities face an uncertain future as they struggle to be included in the typical post-secondary pursuits (e.g., travel, college, work) of their peers without disabilities.

The Disability Cliff

To help offset some of the effects of the disability cliff, educational institutions like Cooke have created programs that teach life skills and provide opportunities to develop career readiness during high school and beyond. Since its inception more than 30 years ago, Cooke has been dedicated to one central goal: fostering independence among people with special needs. To accomplish that goal, Cooke partners with educators, businesses, advocates, nonprofits and social service agencies to bring real-world work experiences to its students. Through a unique internship program, all Cooke students (from grade 9 through age 21) rotate through a series of work environments and job tasks to identify and refine their talents in a variety of areas, including clerical / data entry, retail, food service, child care, maintenance and

animal care. Maddie, Taina, Jayson and Dan have worked as interns for major companies, including Moody's, New York University and the Strategic Group, where they use digital skills they learned at Cooke to do data entry and clerical tasks that support their organization's products and services. They bring a positive outlook and sense of enthusiasm to their internship, and look forward to going to work; the days they spend at their internship are their favorite days of the week!

What do the employers think of their Cooke interns? Brett Rogoff, CEO of Strategic Group, a marketing company, hired his company's first intern, Lydia, who now works as an Office Coordinator in their Chelsea office. When talking about organizations that have made a commitment to employees with special needs, he says, "It's not only 'yes it feels good,'



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LORI TANSLEY

Managing Director,
Finance Transformation Office,
Moody's Corporation

it's way beyond that. It sends the message that you care about diversity, you care about the community around you, you care about making people's lives better, and when you do that, you send the message to your own employees from a motivational and inspirational standpoint.”

Partnering with businesses to provide real-world work experiences has been invaluable in preparing Cooke students for life after school. Cooke's partnership with Moody's grew out of a shared commitment to diversity and inclusion. As part of its corporate social responsibility program, Moody's works with educational partners, like Cooke, on a three-pronged vision that includes empowering people with financial knowledge, working toward environmental sustainability and creating opportunities to ensure that young people reach their potential.² Through its long-standing support of Cooke's programming, Moody's has had a lasting impact on the capacity of Cooke students to achieve new work readiness goals and expand their potential to live more independent lives.

Moody's began a discussion with Cooke program staff about partnering to take a deeper look at the potential for employment in digital skills and technology jobs for people with special needs. Given the rise in neurodiversity initiatives among tech giants such as SAP, Microsoft and DXC (formerly Hewlett Packard), we wondered if it would be possible to design a digital skills for the workplace program within Cooke that would open the door to new opportunities for our graduates to enter the workplace. In particular, we wanted to examine a range of IT and Information Management Support roles that would allow students to master basic digital skills (productivity software skills) as well as determine the potential for more advanced IT skill development as part of their educational training and applied internship opportunities.

We envisioned a model program that would focus on:

- 1 | Digital skill acquisition in both Google and Microsoft applications, with potential for identifying candidates for advanced IT skill development.
- 2 | Curated internship experiences that would apply these skills on the job.

We hoped it would be a win-win situation: businesses would help develop a ready source of new talent for IT support roles, and Cooke would provide an educational pathway to teach students marketable skills that would support their quest to get a job. “Neurodiversity in the workplace is a growing and necessary component of companies' diversity and inclusion strategies,” said Lori Tansley, Managing Director, Finance Transformation Office at Moody's. “Moody's is proud to partner with Cooke School and Institute to develop programs that promote a viable career pipeline in IT support roles for people with intellectual disabilities.”

What follows is a roadmap for the creation of a new digital skills job readiness program. In this white paper, we'll explore the progression of neurodiversity and inclusion initiatives in IT and discuss our vision for extending their reach by proposing a new model. Our model combines digital skills training with real-world job experiences through a unique education / business collaborative model with the goal of training students to learn digital skills for a variety of job tasks (across industries) to better prepare them for employment.



Executive Summary

To explore the growth of neurodiversity initiatives within the IT industry, Cooke partnered with Moody's to conduct a year-long research project about these latest recruitment trends, and to explore whether there was a career readiness pathway that would guide young adults with developmental disabilities toward employment and community inclusion.

Research shows that the goals and scope of neurodiversity initiatives are greatly influenced by a company's culture, and that these initiatives are being used in a variety of ways to influence a global conversation about the nature, goals and vision for diversity and inclusion programs within the workplace.*

Findings on neurodiversity initiatives indicate that:



IT giants such as SAP, Microsoft and DXC Technology have created highly-specialized recruitment programs aimed at securing new talent (mostly among potential recruits with autism), in the areas of software development and testing, cybersecurity and data analytics.



Government and social service agencies have partnered to create post-secondary college opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, and job training programs designed for adults with a variety of disabilities.



Family and friends of people with disabilities have created small businesses, embarking on entrepreneurial projects that tailor employment to the needs and talents of those individuals.



As businesses, nonprofits and government agencies document the benefits of hiring neurodiverse employees, awareness grows about the positive outcomes that can be derived, both in terms of productivity and workplace culture. Businesses are working together to share information on Autism @ Work programs, discuss results of their neurodiversity initiatives and foster growth in new programs.³



Inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce is becoming a business priority that is often aligned with corporate accountability.⁴ Related to these trends in neurodiversity is the rise of corporate social responsibility as an important catalyst that can support these initiatives.

*Given the impact of the 2020 healthcare crisis, the implementation of the Digital Skills for the Workplace Model will likely need to be adapted to meet a variety of changes to workplace culture and structure (e.g., remote workforce, financial restructuring, changes in hiring practices).



The last 10 years have seen a steady growth in the number of neurodiversity initiatives, and the IT industry continues to make inroads into building the capacity of business to recognize the unique talents of individuals with disabilities like autism and ADHD. The larger question is how to capitalize on these programs, these shifting mindsets and workplace benefits, so that more people with disabilities can access a greater variety of college and work options. As these changes take hold, collaboration between educators and industry leaders—like the Cooke / Moody's partnership—will be needed to take full advantage of the core values of inclusion and neurodiversity that hold promise to spark innovation and productivity for future business growth.

Based on this research, and years of experience and expertise in transition planning for young adults with disabilities, Cooke has developed a new digital skills for the workplace model that would incorporate a digital skills training program with a curated internship experience to prepare young adults with special needs to gain entry-level employment. Throughout this white paper, we will utilize an exemplar for this model to illustrate how a digital skills for the workplace program could work at an educational institution, such as Cooke.

The Digital Skills for the Workplace Program Model:



Creates a digital skills training program to teach Google and Microsoft applications and provide internships to help students use their newly-acquired digital skills (beginning with applied productivity software) in a variety of entry-level jobs, while identifying potential candidates to progress to more advanced IT skill acquisition.



Combines essential components identified by both education and business as important for success in digital skills / IT jobs (e.g., soft skills, digital / technical skills, real-world work experience).



Calls for employers (with jobs and talent needs) to provide ongoing feedback on the training and preparation of students, while educators design and teach critical hard and soft skills to support employment readiness.

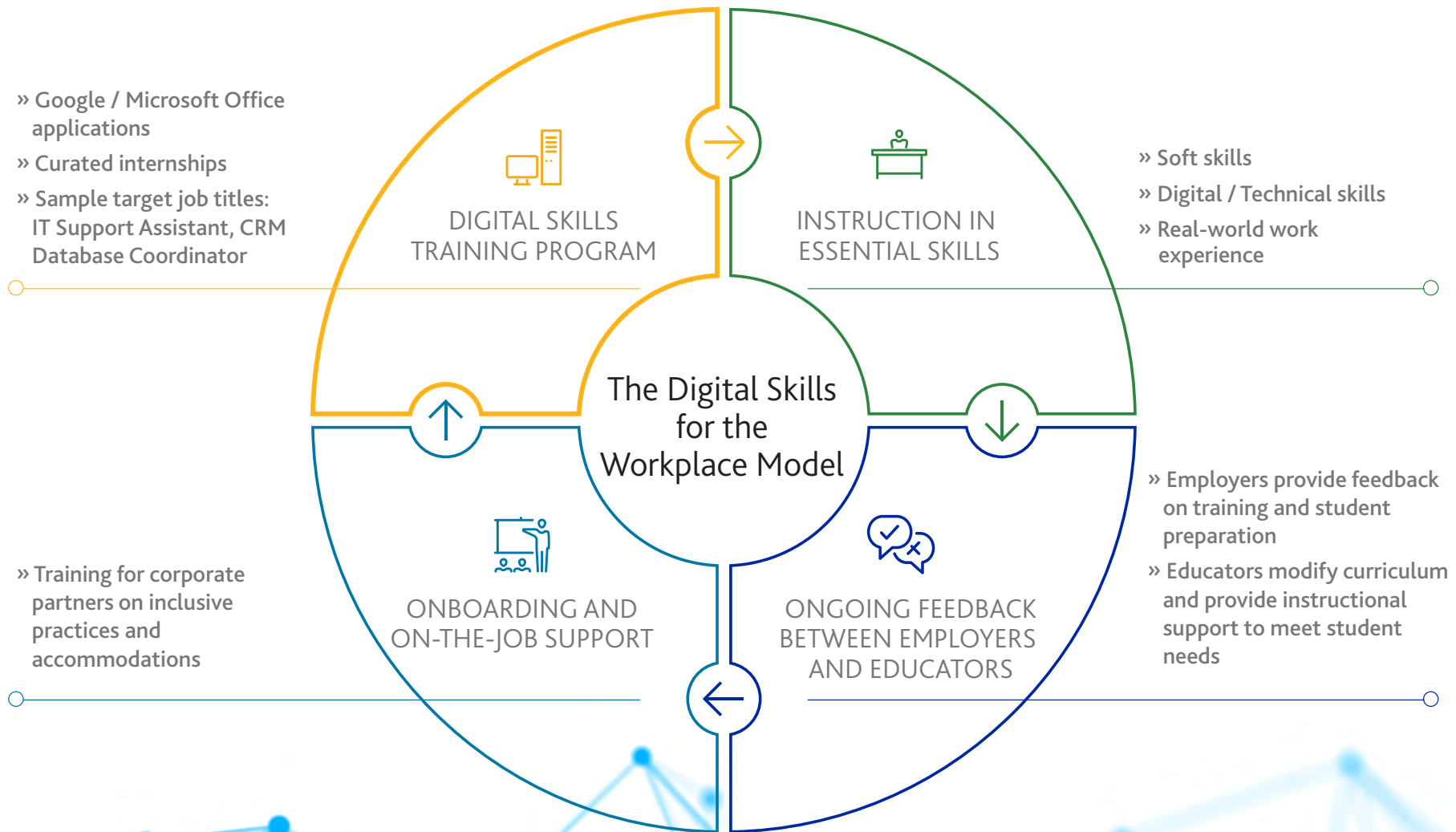


Creates a balance between business-centric and employee-centric approaches by answering the question: How can we strive to achieve the best of both worlds by designing training around real-life jobs (business-centric), while providing person-centric supports for people with special needs (job coaching, flexible schedules)?



Provides onboarding and on-the-job support to educate potential employers and support corporate internship sites as they strive to be more inclusive of staff with disabilities.

The Digital Skills for the Workplace Model



Endnotes

¹ Bagenstos, Samuel R. (Winter 2015). The Disability Cliff. *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.

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⁴ Brodey, Denise. (January 21, 2019) How Business Leaders Are Introducing Disability Rights as a CSR Issue. *Forbes*.

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