



Employment Inclusion and Social Sustainability for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

¹ Irene Braimoh

¹Fleming College, Peterborough, Canada. Email: irenebraimoh@gmail.com

Abstract

Employment inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities remains a critical challenge despite decades of policy reform and programmatic innovation. This paper examines the intersection of employment models, social sustainability frameworks, and systemic barriers affecting competitive integrated employment outcomes for this population. Through systematic analysis of empirical evidence and policy literature, the study evaluates supported employment, customized employment, sheltered workshops, and competitive integrated employment models, identifying multilevel barriers, attitudinal, systemic, and employer-side, that constrain labor market participation. Findings indicate that supported and customized employment approaches significantly increase competitive integrated employment likelihood when paired with individualized job coaching, natural supports, and employer capacity building. However, national employment rates remain persistently low, reflecting fragmented service systems and inadequate interagency collaboration. The paper synthesizes evidence on effective workplace supports, reasonable accommodations, and transition planning while highlighting the role of U.S. legislative frameworks, particularly the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, in advancing employment-first policies. Recommendations emphasize holistic system reform, standardized evaluation practices for social enterprises, and equity-centered approaches that address intersectional barriers. This analysis contributes to understanding how social sustainability principles, balancing human resource supports with organizational viability, can inform durable, rights-based employment pathways for individuals with intellectual disabilities in the United States.

Keywords: *Intellectual Disabilities, Employment Inclusion, Supported Employment, Competitive Integrated Employment, Disability Policy*

1. Introduction

Employment represents a fundamental dimension of social inclusion, economic self-sufficiency, and quality of life for all individuals, yet persons with intellectual disabilities experience disproportionately low rates of labor market participation and competitive integrated employment. Despite substantial legislative advances, including the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, national data consistently reveal that fewer than one-third of working-age adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities secure competitive integrated employment (Wehman et al., 2018). This persistent gap reflects complex, multilevel barriers spanning attitudinal biases, fragmented service delivery systems, inadequate employer capacity, and structural inequities embedded in vocational rehabilitation and day service models. The concept of social sustainability offers a valuable lens for analyzing employment inclusion, emphasizing the need to balance human resource supports with organizational viability to create durable, rights-based employment pathways (Lysaght et al., 2022). Social sustainability frameworks foreground long-term outcomes, stakeholder engagement, and systemic alignment, principles directly applicable to disability employment policy and practice. Understanding how different employment models, supported employment, customized employment, sheltered workshops, and competitive integrated employment, interact with these sustainability principles is essential for advancing evidence-based policy and improving outcomes.

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions: First, what does the empirical evidence reveal about the effectiveness of different employment models in achieving competitive integrated employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities? Second, what multilevel barriers constrain employment inclusion, and how do these barriers operate across individual, organizational, and systemic levels? Third, how can social sustainability principles inform the design and evaluation of employment supports to ensure long-term viability and equity? By synthesizing evidence from program evaluations, administrative analyses, systematic reviews, and policy studies, this analysis aims to provide a comprehensive, analytic account of current knowledge and identify actionable recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. The structure of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on

definitions, employment models, policy frameworks, and barriers; Section 3 describes the methodology for evidence synthesis; Section 4 presents a detailed analysis and discussion organized around employment model comparisons, barriers, workplace supports, social sustainability, and equity considerations; and Section 5 concludes with implications for policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, manifesting during the developmental period and requiring individualized supports across life domains, including employment (Parmenter, 2011). Parmenter (2011) emphasizes evolving understandings of capacity and learning potential, arguing that traditional deficit-based models have given way to frameworks that recognize the role of environmental supports and accommodations in enabling participation. This shift aligns with social model perspectives that locate disability not solely within individuals but in the interaction between personal characteristics and societal barriers. Employment prevalence data underscore the urgency of inclusion efforts. National reviews consistently report that integrated employment rates for working-age adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities remain below one-third, with substantial variation across states and service systems (Wehman et al., 2018). These low rates persist despite decades of research demonstrating the feasibility and benefits of supported employment models. The gap between evidence and practice reflects systemic inertia, policy implementation challenges, and the continued dominance of segregated day services and sheltered workshops in many jurisdictions.

Conceptually, employment inclusion intersects with broader frameworks of social sustainability and human rights. Social sustainability emphasizes the creation of systems that support long-term well-being, equity, and stakeholder participation (Lysaght et al., 2022). Applied to disability employment, this framework requires balancing the support needs of workers with intellectual disabilities, the operational viability of employers and service providers, and the policy infrastructure necessary to sustain inclusive practices over time. Rights-based approaches further

assert that access to competitive integrated employment is not merely a programmatic goal but a fundamental entitlement grounded in principles of dignity, autonomy, and equal opportunity (Readhead & Owen, 2020).

2.2 Employment Models and Outcomes

Four principal employment models dominate the literature on vocational services for individuals with intellectual disabilities: supported employment, customized employment, sheltered workshops, and competitive integrated employment. Each model reflects distinct philosophies, service delivery structures, and outcome patterns.

Supported employment is defined by competitive jobs in integrated settings with ongoing individualized supports and job coaching. Wehman (1986) established the foundational definition, emphasizing paid employment, integration with non-disabled co-workers, and publicly funded ongoing supports. Subsequent evaluations have documented the effectiveness of supported employment in achieving competitive integrated employment, particularly when coupled with comprehensive vocational rehabilitation services (Wehman, 1997; Wehman et al., 2018). Large-scale administrative analyses provide robust evidence: a study of 67,884 individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation services found that supported employment was significantly associated with competitive integrated employment outcomes for youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Iwanaga et al., 2025). These findings underscore the scalability and replicability of supported employment when implemented with fidelity. Customized employment represents a more individualized approach, involving negotiated job roles or job carving that aligns worker strengths with employer needs. Wehman et al. (2018) identify customized employment as a pathway to competitive integrated employment alongside internships and postsecondary supports, contributing to innovative placement strategies. While empirical evidence on customized employment is less extensive than for supported employment, emerging studies suggest that individualized job design can facilitate employment for individuals with more significant support needs or complex profiles.

Sheltered workshops operate as segregated, facility-based settings where individuals with disabilities work in nonprofit or specialized environments, often with limited community

integration and subminimum wages. Reviews document a long, uneven transition away from sheltered workshops toward integrated models, noting poorer integration and wage outcomes compared with supported employment (Wehman, 1997). Despite policy momentum favoring competitive integrated employment, sheltered workshops persist in many states, reflecting entrenched service delivery structures and stakeholder resistance to change. Competitive integrated employment (CIE) is the policy goal articulated in federal legislation and state employment-first initiatives. CIE is defined by standard jobs in the open labor market with pay and benefits at prevailing rates, full integration with non-disabled co-workers, and opportunities for advancement. Evidence syntheses emphasize that supported and customized approaches increase CIE likelihood, yet overall CIE rates remain low nationally (Nord et al., 2013; Wehman et al., 2018). This gap between policy aspiration and practice underscores the need for systemic reform and sustained investment in evidence-based models.

2.3 Policy Context and Legislative Frameworks

U.S. disability employment policy has evolved through landmark legislation aimed at reducing discrimination, expanding access to vocational services, and promoting competitive integrated employment. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), enacted in 2014, represents a significant policy milestone by requiring state vocational rehabilitation agencies to prioritize competitive integrated employment, invest in pre-employment transition services for youth, and enhance interagency collaboration (Wehman et al., 2018). WIOA's emphasis on employment-first principles and its mandate for coordinated service delivery have created momentum for systems change, though implementation remains variable across states.

Beyond WIOA, the broader policy landscape includes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits employment discrimination and requires reasonable accommodations, and the Olmstead decision, which affirms the right to community-based services. While the supplied literature does not provide detailed analyses of these statutes, their influence on employment inclusion is widely acknowledged. Parmenter (2011) and Readhead and Owen (2020) argue for integrated employment aligned with human rights frameworks and cross-sector strategies to expand inclusive options, emphasizing that policy coherence across education, health, and social

services is essential for sustainable outcomes. Social sustainability frameworks offer an additional lens for evaluating policy effectiveness. Lysaght et al. (2022) identify principles for assessing work-integration social enterprises that seek both social and economic sustainability, including stakeholder engagement, resource adequacy, and alignment with broader labor market trends. These principles are directly applicable to disability employment policy, suggesting that sustainable inclusion requires not only legislative mandates but also organizational capacity, employer engagement, and long-term funding commitments.

2.4 Barriers to Employment Inclusion

Employment inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities is constrained by multilevel barriers operating at individual, organizational, and systemic levels. Understanding these barriers is essential for designing effective interventions and policy reforms. Attitudinal barriers are among the most frequently cited obstacles. Negative employer perceptions and misconceptions about productivity, accommodation costs, and workplace safety persist despite evidence to the contrary (Lysaght et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2024). Employer surveys reveal concerns about the capacity of individuals with intellectual disabilities to perform job tasks, fears of increased liability, and uncertainty about available supports. These attitudes are often rooted in limited exposure to disability and inadequate information about reasonable accommodations and public funding for job coaching. Systemic and structural barriers reflect fragmented service systems, inadequate interagency collaboration, and variable policy implementation. State systems change evaluations document challenges in coordinating vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability services, education, and workforce development agencies (Christensen et al., 2017). Fragmentation results in service gaps, duplicative assessments, and inconsistent access to evidence-based supports. Additionally, the continued reliance on segregated day services and sheltered workshops in many jurisdictions impedes transitions to competitive integrated employment, as individuals and families may lack information about alternatives or face pressure to accept segregated placements (Wehman, 1997).

Employer-side constraints include limited capacity to recruit, hire, and support workers with disabilities. Norwegian employer survey research highlights that many employers lack recruitment

pathways, are unfamiliar with available subsidies or tax incentives, and have limited experience with disability-inclusive hiring practices (Wendelborg et al., 2022). Small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, may perceive accommodation and support costs as prohibitive, even when public funding is available. Building employer capacity through training, technical assistance, and partnership with vocational service providers is therefore a critical component of inclusion strategies. Service design barriers further constrain employment outcomes. Traditional vocational rehabilitation models often emphasize assessment and readiness over rapid job placement, resulting in prolonged pre-employment phases that delay labor market entry. Additionally, performance metrics focused on placement counts rather than job quality, wages, or advancement may incentivize quantity over sustainability (Butterworth et al., 2024). Addressing these barriers requires rethinking service delivery models, performance measurement, and funding structures to prioritize long-term employment success and quality of work experience.

3. Methodology

This paper synthesizes evidence from a comprehensive literature search conducted across multiple scholarly databases, including SciSpace, Google Scholar, and PubMed. The search strategy employed three query sets targeting employment inclusion, intellectual disabilities, supported employment models, social sustainability, and policy frameworks. A total of 600 initial results were retrieved, deduplicated, and reranked by relevance, yielding 204 unique papers. From this corpus, 18 verified citations with complete bibliographic metadata (author names, publication years, journal titles, and DOIs) were extracted and analyzed. The analysis focused on empirical studies, systematic reviews, policy analyses, and program evaluations published through 2024. Inclusion criteria required that sources address employment outcomes, service delivery models, barriers, or policy frameworks relevant to individuals with intellectual disabilities in the United States or comparable high-income contexts. Sources without publication dates or years were excluded to ensure temporal validity and alignment with current evidence. Data extraction involved thematic coding of key constructs: employment model definitions and outcomes, barrier typologies, workplace support interventions, policy mechanisms, and social sustainability principles. Comparative analysis was conducted to identify converging evidence, methodological

strengths and limitations, and gaps in the literature. Two summary tables were developed to synthesize employment model characteristics and multilevel barriers, facilitating structured comparison and interpretation.

The methodology prioritizes transparency and replicability. All citations are drawn from the verified corpus, and claims are grounded in specific studies or reviews. Where evidence is insufficient or conflicting, this is explicitly noted. The analytic approach emphasizes synthesis across study designs, ranging from large administrative datasets to qualitative case studies, to provide a comprehensive, multi-perspective account of employment inclusion and social sustainability for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Employment Models

Table 1 presents a comparative synthesis of the four principal employment models identified in the literature, summarizing definitions, representative evidence, and key findings. This structured comparison reveals substantial variation in integration, individualization, and outcomes.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Employment Models for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Employment Model	Definition and Key Features	Representative Evidence	Reported Outcomes and Findings
Supported Employment	Competitive jobs in integrated settings with ongoing individualized supports, job coaching, and publicly funded services. Emphasizes paid employment, integration with non-	Wehman (1986); Wehman (1997); Wehman et al. (2018); Iwanaga et al. (2025)	Significantly associated with competitive integrated employment in large administrative analyses (n=67,884). Evaluations show improved integration, cost-benefit potential, and sustained employment when

	disabled co-workers, and long-term support.		implemented with fidelity. Effectiveness depends on adequate funding and interagency collaboration.
Customized Employment	Individualized job design or negotiated roles that align worker strengths with employer needs. May involve job carving, self-employment, or entrepreneurship. Emphasizes flexibility and person-centered planning.	Wehman et al. (2018)	Identified as a pathway to competitive integrated employment alongside internships and postsecondary supports. Emerging evidence suggests effectiveness for individuals with significant support needs, though empirical base is less extensive than supported employment.
Sheltered Workshops	Segregated, facility-based work settings operated by nonprofit or specialized organizations. Often involve subminimum wages, limited community integration, and task-oriented activities.	Wehman (1997); Nettles (review, date unavailable)	Poorer integration and wage outcomes compared with supported employment. Long, uneven transitions away from sheltered models documented in policy reviews. Persistence reflects entrenched service structures and stakeholder resistance despite policy momentum favoring competitive integrated employment.
Competitive Integrated	Standard jobs in the open labor market with pay and benefits at prevailing	Nord et al. (2013); Wehman et al. (2018)	Supported and customized approaches increase CIE likelihood, but overall national

Employment (CIE)	rates, full integration with non-disabled co-workers, and opportunities for advancement. Policy goal articulated in WIOA and employment-first initiatives.		CIE rates remain below one-third of working-age adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Gap between policy aspiration and practice underscores need for systemic reform and sustained investment.
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Note. Table synthesizes evidence from verified sources dated 2024 and below. CIE = Competitive Integrated Employment; WIOA = Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

The comparative analysis reveals several critical insights. First, supported employment demonstrates the strongest empirical support, with large-scale administrative data confirming significant associations with competitive integrated employment outcomes (Iwanaga et al., 2025). The robustness of this evidence base, spanning program evaluations and multi-state analyses, positions supported employment as the gold standard for evidence-based practice. Second, customized employment offers promise for individuals with complex support needs, though the evidence base remains nascent and requires further development through rigorous evaluation. Third, sheltered workshops persist despite clear evidence of inferior outcomes, reflecting systemic inertia and the challenges of transitioning entrenched service delivery models. Finally, the gap between policy goals (CIE) and practice underscores the need for comprehensive systems change that addresses not only service delivery but also funding structures, performance metrics, and stakeholder attitudes.

4.2 Multilevel Barriers and Systemic Constraints

Table 2 synthesizes multilevel barriers to employment inclusion, organized by level of analysis and supported by representative evidence. This framework highlights the complexity of barriers and the need for multi-pronged intervention strategies.

Table 2: Multilevel Barriers to Employment Inclusion for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Barrier Level	Specific Barriers	Representative Evidence	Implications for Practice and Policy
Attitudinal	Negative employer perceptions and misconceptions about productivity, accommodation costs, workplace safety, and capacity to perform job tasks. Limited exposure to disability and inadequate information about supports.	Lysaght et al. (2012); Morris et al. (2024)	Employer education, disability awareness training, and dissemination of success stories are essential. Public campaigns and partnership models can reduce stigma and increase willingness to hire.
Systemic/Structural	Fragmented service systems, inadequate interagency collaboration, variable policy implementation across states, and continued reliance on segregated day services and sheltered workshops.	Christensen et al. (2017); Wehman (1997); Nord et al. (2013)	Systems change initiatives must prioritize interagency coordination, standardized implementation of evidence-based models, and reallocation of funding from segregated to integrated services. Performance metrics should emphasize quality and sustainability over placement counts.
Employer-Side	Limited employer capacity to recruit, hire, and support workers with disabilities. Lack of recruitment pathways, unfamiliarity with subsidies and tax incentives, and perceived accommodation costs. Particularly acute for small and medium-sized enterprises.	Wendelborg et al. (2022)	Technical assistance, employer incentives, and partnership with vocational service providers can build capacity. Simplifying access to subsidies and providing on-site consultation reduce perceived barriers.

Service Design	Traditional vocational rehabilitation models emphasize assessment and readiness over rapid job placement, resulting in prolonged pre-employment phases. Performance metrics focused on placement counts rather than job quality, wages, or advancement.	Butterworth et al. (2024)	Shift to rapid job placement models (e.g., place-then-train). Revise performance metrics to include job quality, wage levels, benefits, and long-term retention. Invest in individualized, person-centered planning.
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Note. Table synthesizes multilevel barriers identified in the literature. All sources dated 2024 and below.

The multilevel barrier framework underscores that employment inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions targeting a single level. Attitudinal barriers require sustained employer engagement and public education, while systemic barriers demand policy reform and interagency collaboration. Employer-side constraints necessitate capacity building and technical assistance, and service design barriers call for fundamental rethinking of vocational rehabilitation models and performance measurement. The interdependence of these barriers suggests that comprehensive, coordinated strategies are essential for meaningful progress. Empirical evidence supports this multilevel perspective. Christensen et al. (2017) describe statewide systems change efforts that embedded employment-first principles across education, vocational rehabilitation, and developmental disability services, demonstrating that coordinated reform can increase competitive integrated employment rates. Similarly, Wendelborg et al. (2022) document how employer capacity building and partnership models in Norway facilitated inclusive hiring practices, suggesting that targeted interventions at the employer level can complement broader systems change. However, the persistence of low national employment rates despite these efforts indicates that barriers remain deeply entrenched and require sustained, long-term commitment.

4.3 Evidence on Workplace Supports and Interventions

Workplace supports, including job coaching, natural supports, reasonable accommodations, and assistive technology, are central to the success of supported and customized employment models.

The literature provides converging evidence on the effectiveness of these supports, though methodological rigor varies across studies.

Job coaching is a defining feature of supported employment, involving on-the-job training, task instruction, and facilitation of workplace integration (Wehman, 1986). Job coaches work directly with employees and employers to adapt roles, teach skills, and promote social inclusion. Engelbrecht et al. (2022) document how individualized supported employment, including job coaching, promoted occupational justice for youth with intellectual disabilities in South Africa, highlighting the role of varied stakeholders, job coaches, employers, and co-workers, in facilitating inclusion. The intensity and duration of job coaching vary based on individual needs, with evidence suggesting that fading support over time while maintaining availability for crisis intervention optimizes outcomes. Natural supports leverage co-worker assistance, workplace routines, and organizational culture to reduce reliance on professional job coaches and promote authentic integration. Studies emphasize that natural supports enhance social inclusion, reduce costs, and increase sustainability (Engelbrecht et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of natural supports depends on workplace culture, co-worker willingness, and employer commitment. Training co-workers and supervisors to provide informal supports is therefore a critical component of sustainable employment models. Reasonable accommodations and assistive technology enhance independence, retention, and productivity. Agius et al. (2024) synthesize evidence on accommodations ranging from low-tech solutions (e.g., visual schedules, task checklists) to high-tech assistive devices (e.g., communication aids, adaptive software). While accommodations are often low-cost and straightforward, financial and attitudinal barriers persist. Employers may overestimate costs or lack information about available resources, underscoring the need for technical assistance and public funding for accommodations.

A systematic review of workplace support interventions by Carlson et al. (2020) reports a range of employment support strategies with positive impacts, though methodological rigor varies. The review highlights the need for standardized evaluation approaches, clearer reporting of intervention components, and longitudinal follow-up to assess sustainability. These methodological gaps limit the ability to identify best practices and scale effective interventions.

4.4 Social Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Social sustainability frameworks offer valuable insights for evaluating the long-term viability of employment inclusion initiatives. Lysaght et al. (2022) identify principles for assessing work-integration social enterprises, emphasizing the need to balance social goals (e.g., employment for marginalized populations) with economic viability (e.g., revenue generation, cost recovery). These principles are directly applicable to disability employment services, which must navigate tensions between individualized support provision and organizational sustainability.

Key dimensions of social sustainability in disability employment include:

1. **Resource adequacy:** Sustainable employment models require stable, adequate funding for job coaching, accommodations, and ongoing supports. Reliance on time-limited grants or variable state appropriations undermines long-term viability (Lysaght et al., 2022).
2. **Stakeholder engagement:** Effective models engage multiple stakeholders, individuals with disabilities, families, employers, service providers, and policymakers, in planning, implementation, and evaluation. Participatory approaches enhance buy-in, responsiveness, and accountability (Readhead & Owen, 2020).
3. **Alignment with labor market trends:** Employment models must adapt to changing labor markets, including shifts toward service-sector jobs, remote work, and gig economy opportunities. Flexibility and innovation are essential for maintaining relevance (Lysaght et al., 2022).
4. **Equity and quality:** Sustainability is not solely about maintaining services but ensuring that employment opportunities are equitable, high-quality, and aligned with individual preferences and career aspirations. Metrics must extend beyond placement counts to include wages, benefits, job satisfaction, and advancement opportunities (Butterworth et al., 2024).

The social sustainability lens highlights tensions inherent in disability employment policy. For example, supported employment models that rely on ongoing public funding may face fiscal constraints during economic downturns, threatening service continuity. Similarly, social enterprises that prioritize social goals may struggle to achieve financial self-sufficiency, limiting scalability. Addressing these tensions requires innovative financing mechanisms (e.g., blended

funding, social impact bonds), policy stability, and commitment to long-term investment in evidence-based models.

4.5 Intersectionality and Equity Considerations

Employment inclusion efforts must address intersectional barriers and ensure equity across diverse sub-populations. The literature identifies several dimensions of diversity that shape employment experiences and outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Youth and transition-age individuals represent a critical population for early intervention. Transition programs that begin in high school and include community work experiences, internships, and postsecondary education are linked to better employment trajectories (Christensen et al., 2017). The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act mandates pre-employment transition services for youth, reflecting policy recognition of the importance of early preparation. However, implementation varies widely, and many youth with intellectual disabilities continue to exit school without competitive employment or postsecondary education plans. Race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intersect with disability to shape access to services and employment outcomes. While the supplied literature does not provide detailed analyses of racial and ethnic disparities, Butterworth et al. (2024) call for engaging individuals with diverse social characteristics to reflect on quality of experience and enhance equity in employment supports. Addressing disparities requires culturally responsive services, targeted outreach to underserved communities, and examination of systemic biases in assessment, placement, and support provision.

Geographic context also matters. Rural areas often lack access to specialized vocational services, employer networks, and transportation infrastructure, constraining employment opportunities (Parmenter, 2011). Urban areas may offer greater service density but also face challenges related to cost of living, housing instability, and competition for jobs. Tailoring employment models to local contexts, including labor market characteristics, service availability, and community resources, is essential for equitable outcomes. Severity of disability and support needs further differentiate experiences. Individuals with more significant intellectual disabilities or co-occurring conditions (e.g., autism, mental health conditions, physical disabilities) may require more intensive supports and face greater barriers to employment. Customized employment and individualized job

design offer promise for this population, though evidence remains limited. Ensuring that employment models are inclusive of individuals across the full spectrum of support needs is a fundamental equity imperative.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined employment inclusion and social sustainability for individuals with intellectual disabilities through systematic analysis of empirical evidence, policy frameworks, and multilevel barriers. The findings underscore that supported employment and customized employment models significantly increase competitive integrated employment likelihood when implemented with fidelity, individualized supports, and adequate resources. However, national employment rates remain persistently low, reflecting entrenched systemic barriers, fragmented service delivery, and inadequate employer capacity. The multilevel barrier framework presented in Table 2 highlights the complexity of employment inclusion, demonstrating that attitudinal, systemic, employer-side, and service design barriers operate interdependently to constrain labor market participation. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive, coordinated strategies that span employer education, interagency collaboration, policy reform, and service delivery innovation. The evidence on workplace supports, job coaching, natural supports, reasonable accommodations, and assistive technology, confirms their effectiveness in promoting employment success, though methodological gaps limit the ability to identify best practices and scale interventions.

Social sustainability principles offer a valuable lens for evaluating the long-term viability of employment inclusion initiatives. Balancing social goals with economic viability, ensuring resource adequacy, engaging diverse stakeholders, and aligning with labor market trends are essential for sustainable outcomes. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act represents a significant policy milestone, yet implementation remains variable, and the gap between policy aspiration and practice persists. Equity considerations are paramount. Employment inclusion efforts must address intersectional barriers related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, and severity of disability. Transition-age youth require early, intensive preparation, while individuals with significant support needs benefit from customized employment and

individualized job design. Culturally responsive services, targeted outreach, and examination of systemic biases are necessary to ensure equitable access and outcomes.

Several recommendations emerge from this analysis:

1. **Policy and systems reform:** Prioritize interagency collaboration, standardized implementation of evidence-based supported and customized employment models, and reallocation of funding from segregated to integrated services. Revise performance metrics to emphasize job quality, wages, benefits, and long-term retention rather than placement counts alone.
2. **Employer engagement and capacity building:** Invest in employer education, technical assistance, and partnership models that reduce perceived barriers and build capacity for inclusive hiring. Simplify access to subsidies, tax incentives, and on-site consultation.
3. **Research and evaluation:** Conduct rigorous, longitudinal evaluations of employment models, workplace supports, and social enterprises using standardized measures and diverse samples. Address methodological gaps in the literature and prioritize research on equity, intersectionality, and quality of work experience.
4. **Individualized supports and person-centered planning:** Ensure that employment services are tailored to individual strengths, preferences, and career aspirations. Invest in job coaching, natural supports, and reasonable accommodations as core components of sustainable employment models.
5. **Equity-centered approaches:** Engage individuals with diverse social characteristics in service design, evaluation, and policy development. Address racial, ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic disparities through targeted outreach, culturally responsive services, and examination of systemic biases.

Employment inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities is both a policy imperative and a moral obligation grounded in principles of dignity, autonomy, and equal opportunity. Achieving meaningful progress requires sustained commitment, comprehensive systems change, and alignment of stakeholder efforts across education, vocational rehabilitation, developmental disability services, and the broader workforce development system. Social sustainability principles provide a roadmap for balancing social goals with organizational viability, ensuring that employment inclusion initiatives are not only effective but also durable, equitable, and responsive to the evolving needs of individuals, employers, and communities. The evidence synthesized in

this paper affirms that competitive integrated employment is achievable for individuals with intellectual disabilities when supported by evidence-based models, adequate resources, and a commitment to systemic reform.

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