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Perceived Benefits of Upskilling and Reskilling by Persons who Are Among the Employed, Underemployed, and Unemployed

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceived influence, potential impact, and benefits that upskilling, and reskilling have on the employed, underemployed, and unemployed worker. In addition, this study seeks to explore whether the perceived benefits of upskilling and reskilling include moving above the poverty line and therefore, out of poverty in real and sustainable ways. This resulting new position and potential increase in pay could have the positive impact of moving them and their families above the poverty line. The results of this study indicate that participants perceive upskilling and reskilling to be an option that is available but only for the select few. It is perceived that employers look to a certain employee(s) for upskilling/reskilling and exclude others. It is also perceived the opportunities are limited. The results of this study further highlight several themes that participants perceived as barriers. These themes included such barriers as mental health, criminal background, daycare issues, lack of education, time/procrastination, transportation, not enough income, knowledge/skills, age, fear, language barrier, lack of technology skills, and disabilities. The implications from the findings of this research include more community awareness of employment barriers to those with prior criminal history and experiencing reentry to help combat recidivism. There is also a need for social work education on the micro and macro levels to assist individuals experiencing mental disorders that lead to barriers to employment for the underserved and overlooked populations.

Perceived Benefits of Upskilling and Reskilling by Persons who Are Among the
Employed, Underemployed, and Unemployed

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Social Work

By

Rosalind Marie Evans

May 2022

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Rosalind Evans, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Science in Social Work



Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

Date

May 25, 2022

Thesis Committee

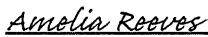


Malcolm Scott (May 25, 2022 12:35 CDT)

Dr. Malcolm Scott, Chair



Dr. Tom Winter



Amelia Reeves (May 25, 2022 12:52 CDT)

Amelia Reeves

I would like to thank God first for giving me this opportunity to complete my master's degree amid many obstacles. I would like to thank Tim Evans who is my rock and spiritual husband. Thank you for encouraging me and supporting me throughout this journey. Thank you to my children Chanell, Tiana, Tim, Jr. and Elijah who loved and supported their mom through the highs and the lows.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Poverty has been a persistent and pervasive blemish on the landscape of the American dream since its founding in September 1776 when the Constitutional Congress formally declared the name *the United States of America*. The levels of poverty have varied over the years in numbers as well as in different areas. Between 2007 and 2012, the poverty level rose over 3% from 12.5% to 15% (Whitaker et al., 2014). Employment has been a means to help address the redirection of poverty, however, some employees remain poor because of low wages that do not help meet the needs of their family (Feder & Yu, 2020). There are many ways to address this problem; however, unemployment and underemployment are two prominent commodities in this poverty predicament that remain. This study introduces underemployment, contextualizes the issue as a social problem, provides the rationale for its study, and presents the overarching research questions guiding this study.

Statement of the Problem

Why should the subject of underemployment be studied? How does it connect to social issues? Some of the indicators of underemployment are involuntary part-time work, involuntary temporary work, over-qualification, and underpayment (Maynard & Feldman, 2011). There are many people in the workforce that might not realize they are underemployed but fit in one of the categories. Graham et al. (2018) point out that

individuals with disabilities fall into the underemployment category with 34% part-time in 2016 compared to 18% without a disability.

Psychological, social, and emotional impact of underemployment and unemployment are also key areas for consideration found in the literature and have been linked to characteristics associated specifically with underemployment. These include, but are not limited to, work attitudes, job satisfaction, psychological and physical health consequences, and strain on personal and professional relationships (Anderson & Winefield, 2012). The psychological aspect can affect an individual that is trying to provide for their family. There are instances where income is limited, and the individual is unable to have their financial ends met. The psychological aspect can affect an individual that is trying to provide for their family. There are instances where income is limited, and the individual is unable to have their financial ends met.

In order to provide for a family, having a sustainable income is significant. The poverty rate as instituted by the Census Bureau changes over time and is established based on people who have trouble meeting their own financial needs or the needs of their families (Inequality.org, n.d.). The poverty rate in 2020 was 11.4% in comparison to 1988 when the rate was 10.5% (Schrider et al., 2021). The span of these figures is 32 years, and it shows that poverty continues to be an issue in the United States.

The median household income in 1988 was \$27,230 and in 2020 was \$67,521 (Schrider et al., 2021). In this example, although the difference in income within this 32-year span is over \$40,000, inflation happens, the prices of goods and services increase, and the purchasing value of money decreases.

While workers are working and making money to earn a living, sometimes the rate of pay or the work is not enough to sustain the growing family population. This employment phenomenon has a significant impact on individuals who are employed but categorized as underemployed. Part-time work and reductions in usual work hours are gauges of underemployment (Schrider et al., 2021).

One way of addressing the underemployment/unemployment problem is through upskilling and reskilling. The underemployed can upskill or reskill in their current job, but what are the barriers that are hindering them from making this move? What are the barriers that are preventing the unemployed from applying to jobs that can provide substantial income? Laudet et al. (2002) hypothesize that mental health symptoms, fear of failure, and insufficient skills are significant obstacles in pursuing employment. Brown and Pintaldi (2006) postulate that availability to work more hours, amount of notice given to work more hours, illness, or family leave, are indicators for an individual being classified as underemployed.

The young and the old are experiencing barriers to employment. Three common frustrations felt by young job seekers are the employer's expectation in relation to work experience, the young person's preferred occupation, the job seeker's applying for jobs not in line with their career ambitions, and the job seeker's ability to exhibit themselves to potential employer (Moore, 2019). Military veterans also experience barriers to unemployment, such as lack of transportation, family burdens and financial issues (Davis et al., 2014).

Another barrier present is federal programs in relation to employment. At times, disabled individuals (DI) have a disability that does not totally hinder them from working

so they are categorized as employable. In an article by Kregel (2015), he discusses how an estimated 28% of DI beneficiaries live in households below the Federal Poverty Level, receive smaller payments, are less likely to have completed high school, and have looked for work but face several barriers to employment (Kegel, 2015).

The Social Security Administration sets an income limit for individuals receiving disability payments while working. For 2021, the substantial gainful activity income is \$1310 per month for a non-blind individual and \$2190 per month for a blind individual (Social Security Administration, n.d.). Once an individual goes over the income limit for Social Security, their disability payment is lowered or stopped. This can discourage those seeking employment or upskilling/reskilling for higher income.

Another federal program is SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in which approval of benefits is determined by income and resource levels. See Table 1 for income guidelines for the State of Texas for 2021 (Texas Health and Human Services, n.d.). An individual who is receiving SNAP benefits may use caution applying for jobs or upskilling/reskilling to avoid losing SNAP benefits which is another perceived barrier.

Table 1

Maximum Monthly Income Limits for SNAP Eligibility

Family Size	Monthly Amount of Income Allowed
1	\$1775
2	\$2396
3	\$3020
4	\$3644
5	\$4268
For each additional person	\$625

(Texas Health and Human Services; *SNAP Food Benefits*)

Overarching Research Question

The underemployed can upskill or reskill and the benefits are tangible and potentially life changing. COVID-19 has changed the workforce significantly since the pandemic came in and altered how work is conducted. Because of the pandemic, jobs were temporarily converted from the traditional way of going into the office to remote employment. As a result, employers had to reconsider how to recruit new employees, and train or retrain current workers to maintain their workforce. How can employers attract employees after a hard-hit pandemic? Because of layoffs and reduction in job force during the pandemic, what can employers do to protect their companies? What are the barriers that individuals face in seeking employment or upskilling and reskilling at their current place of employment?

Research Gap

It seems clear from the literature, an area that needs more research is the perceived barriers to upskilling and reskilling in the context of those who are experiencing unemployment and underemployment. Although previous studies show evidence that relate to the barriers, more research is needed in this area of study. The current studies are limited on the impact of underemployment on individual lives. One area that requires more research is the study of underemployment in recent college graduates. According to Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2011), there is a need for future research on graduate underemployment that explores the ways in which underemployed graduates make sense of their situation over time. While recent studies on underemployment and unemployment are insightful, there is little known about the perceived barriers of upskilling and reskilling for employees. This study aims to bring to

light the barriers and challenges that face employees in the workforce who are underemployed/unemployed. This issue is under-explored, and this study aims to address this research knowledge gap.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the question: what are the barriers of individuals from the ages of 19 to 65 who are skilled but are categorized as unemployed or underemployed, and how does it relate to poverty? Unemployment is a grave social problem and has increased even more based on the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor in October 2020, the unemployment rate in the US is higher by 3.5%, and the number of unemployed increased by 5.3 million compared to pre-COVID-19 levels in February 2020 (Chen et al., 2021). Underemployment is a problem that can be seen years ago but is still a concern today.

In a study by Stofferahn (2000) in the Department of Sociology at the University of North Dakota, the author conducted interviews to compare the definition of *underemployed* that is defined by sociologists to those others identify as underemployed. In his study, among the underemployed, their definition is determined by whether they have a “good” or “bad” job (Stofferahn, 2000) and not necessarily by the money they make. The workers considered to have a “good” job felt their loyalty to the job provided job security, a living wage, and opportunities for advancement (Stofferahn, 2000).

In the minds of some workers, loyalty means job security and keeping a steady paycheck coming in the household. Even if the pay is minimum wage and does not meet all the financial needs of their family, in their mind, one day, a job promotion or advancement will provide the money needed to sustain the family and their daily needs.

Tang summarizes this thought by saying, “economic security is not (or should not be) just about having enough to survive” (Tang, 2015, p. 41).

The definition that workers assign to *underemployment* is key to determining what barriers they face. Barriers can be compared to roadblocks that hinder a person from moving forward. To illustrate this point, one can visualize traveling down the highway. Along the way, there is an observation of a road construction barricade that hinders the original pathway chosen. Because of this unforeseen distraction, a decision must be made on how to reroute the original trip. The distraction of a construction barricade is considered a barrier that causes an individual to rethink the direction that they made concerning travel. For example, if an individual is working a job where the income does not help meet the needs of their family, and they are eligible to upskill/reskill to a job that pays more, what is the barrier that is hindering them from making this employment change? This study will help to answer the questions surrounding this issue.

Significance of the Study

This study is important and potentially significant because it seeks to fill gaps in the current research concerning perceived barriers to upskilling and reskilling for the underemployed and unemployed. Upskilling is a tool used to help individuals who are underemployed apply for jobs that will better suit their skill level as well as provide a sense of financial security. Although upskilling is available, there are barriers that hinder the ones choosing to investigate the possibility of advancing in their job venture. Additionally, what does the underemployed consider “work,” how do they define *underemployment*, and what barriers hinder them from considering upskilling to apply to higher-paying jobs that could advance them above the poverty line?

Rogers et al. (2021) highlighted how COVID-19 changed the working environment for employers and employees. After the pandemic, employers are playing catch-up with the upskilling and reskilling phenomenon that can retain current employees and help with organizational development (Rogers et al., 2021). Cawood (2020) points out that IBM executive chair Ginni Rometty encouraged corporations to reskill workers to arm them for the new digital economy or else be left holding the bag. Since this opportunity might have been missed by some industries prior to COVID-19, a new initiative was proposed by Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas (WSWCT) to address this issue. The first thing to consider is why employees who are eligible to upskill or reskill are not taking advantage of this opportunity.

The income and poverty numbers in the United States for 2020 were reported as showing the poverty rate increased in 2020 to 11.4% from 2019 to 2020. However, the report posts government stimulus payments which shows the poverty rate decreased by 2.6% from 2019 (Warnick, 2021). The United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which was a \$2.2 trillion package that boosted the unemployment insurance \$600 per week and provided a \$1200 direct cash payment to eligible individuals with qualifying incomes. This could potentially backfire after the payments cease and individuals are back in the rotation of seeking employment to maintain sustainable income. The poverty numbers can change significantly in the upcoming years and thus upskilling, reskilling, and new job opportunities is crucial now. Warnick (2021) points out that according to the Census Bureau, the poverty rate would have been 12.7% or 11.7 million people if stimulus payments were not provided. Knowing the perceived barriers to current and potential employees seeking employment

and upskilling and reskilling changes can help agencies such as WSWCT to develop career pathways that can help address this issue.

Definition of Terms

Underemployment can be defined as anyone who does not use their job qualifications or skills at their full potential (Bell, 2013). There are two forms of underemployment: visible and invisible. *Visible underemployment* is when an individual works fewer hours required for a full-time job based on a reduced schedule in their chosen field. *Invisible underemployment* refers to an individual who is unable to find a job in their chosen field; therefore, they work a job that is not equal with their skill level, which usually pays below their normal wage (Chen, 2021).

Upskilling can be defined as an individual in the process of acquiring or discovering new skills for a job or profession (Cohen, 2019). *Reskilling* is the development of new skills and knowledge to give an opportunity to perform new jobs or professions (Cole, 2018).

According to the U.S. government definition, *poverty* assumes that there is a standard of living below which Americans are considered *deprived* (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). The federal government uses poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines to determine if individuals are poor (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). The poverty threshold is a federally established minimum level of income deemed adequate in the U.S. and is set by the U.S. Department of Human Services. Examples of poverty include an individual or family not having enough food, water, shelter, clothing, and/or medical care to meet their basic daily needs.

In this study, poverty is exhibited by individuals who are working but are considered as underemployed or not working or unemployed. The underemployed are working a job, however, the income is not considered sustainable wages. The unemployed experience poverty because the lack of income can lead to privation and the basic need of the individual grows deeper.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will explore an investigation and comparison of research on why individuals who are employed/underemployed do not consider jobs that could pay more and assist in their financial stability. Individuals who are employed/underemployed have several reasons for being in their current situation. The point of this literature review is to examine what poverty is, the history behind poverty, how it affects those that are underemployed, and what barriers are hindering these individuals from upskilling or reskilling to obtain higher paying jobs that meet or exceed their financial needs.

History of Poverty

Poverty is a subject that extends back years and affects millions of people. DiNitto and Johnson (2016) address the issue of poverty and provide rational and characteristic descriptions of people who remain poor and in poverty. One consistent theme that can be seen in historical and contemporary rationalizations about poverty and poor people is the poor are poor because of low economic productivity and a lack of human capital (i.e., knowledge, skills, training, and education) (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). These four attributes are key factors that could motivate individuals in poverty to pursue jobs that provide opportunities to begin their journey out of poverty.

Borras and Edquist (2015) discuss that education and training are key in individual competence building that requires knowledge, understanding, and skills. Cole's (2018) report shows that training is designed to augment existing skills or gain

new knowledge or skills to perform new jobs or enter new professions which are characteristics needed for upskilling/reskilling.

Poverty and Governmental Response

There are government programs that establish the poverty threshold such as Social Security Administration (SSA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. Poverty thresholds were originally researched and set by Mollie Orshansky. In 1958, Orshansky joined the Social Security Administration (SSA) as a social science research analyst. Her first assignment working for SSA was to prepare an article on estimated family cost of living, set fee scales in large cities, and complete research on poverty as it affects children (Fisher, 2008).

Orshansky initially established poverty threshold calculations in 1964 when President Lydon Johnson declared a war on poverty, and there was a debate as to whether the conceptualization was too high or low (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). In August of 1969, Orshansky's thresholds were adopted by the federal government as the official statistical definition of poverty (Fisher, 2008).

Over the years, the poverty threshold has changed over time based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). One instance is in 2013, the poverty threshold for a household of four with two parents and two children was \$23,624. In this same year, 9.1 million families in the United States, or 11.2% of these families, were poor (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016). Based on these figures, it would take an average of \$9,834 to bring each household up to the poverty threshold; this process is called the "income deficit" or the "poverty gap" (DiNitto & Johnson, 2016).

Zhang et al. (2021) describe poverty by using the so-called poverty line, which refers to the minimum cost of goods and services necessary for basic survival under a certain space of time, space, and social development stage. Depending on the cost of living in different regions of the world, a poverty line is established to categorize income brackets. The poverty line is adjusted year by year according to the price index, which is estimated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bialek, 2020).

Underemployment

Underemployment has been known to be a continuing issue in rural America (Stofferahn, 2000) and has grown since the 1970s (Jones-Johnson & Johnson, 1992). Underemployment also affects the minority, lower income, and workers in several specific occupations (Kim & Golden, 2022). Kim and Golden (2022) call attention to African American and Hispanic workers constantly displaying a higher frequency of part-time underemployment than white workers. College students are another category of individuals having high levels of unemployment and under-employment (Rosemond & Owens, 2019).

Underemployment Defined

Underemployment is categorized in several diverse ways, depending on how it is defined, and affects all minority groups on various levels. DeJong and Madamba (2001) define *underemployment* as part-time workers, the working poor, overqualified workers with jobs mismatched to their skills, and unemployed workers. Guerrero and Rothstein (2012) describe underemployment as an undesirable outcome. In addition, underemployment is the degree to which an individual's education, skills, and abilities are underutilized by their current job, which affects both underemployed or unemployed

people, because their contributions are less than expected to economic growth (Guerrero & Rothstein, 2012).

In an article by Ur Rehman et al. (2021), the authors introduce three criteria developed in 1998, that were used to identify whether a worker was underemployed.

Table 2 shows the three criteria for assessing underemployment among workers.

Table 2

Underemployment Criteria

Criteria for Underemployment	Indicator
Part-time employment	Job that was involuntary (not chosen by worker)
Job or work condition	Position considered low wage work
Job or position	Considered a professional mismatch

Rosemond and Owens (2019) describe underemployment as a phenomenon that occurs when one is overqualified or overeducated for the position that they occupy.

Thompson et al. (2015) view underemployment as a multidimensional phenomenon and individuals are able to obtain adequate employment based on their education, experience level, wages, job status, job field, knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes.

Latin America has a different definition of *underemployment*. Caceres and Caceres (2015) define *underemployment* as an individual working fewer than 35 hours a week but wanting to work more. There are diverse definitions of *underemployment*, but a few characteristics are consistent, such as working fewer hours than full-time employment, education, experience, knowledge, skills, ability, and a job that underutilized a person's skills.

Underemployment and Poverty

Underemployment is one of the factors that could contribute to poverty. The government, during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, devoted more financial

resources to fighting poverty than any other administration, except that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Abramsky, 2014). It has been over 50 years since the war on poverty, and poverty still exists today. President Johnson's National Advisory Commission authored a publication called *The People Left Behind*, which noted that unemployment and underemployment were major problems in rural America (Slack et al., 2020).

There are workers who are categorized as underemployed and still live in poverty. Apergis et al. (2011) completed a study and reported their findings on the relationship between poverty and income. Their findings show that there is a bidirectional relationship between poverty and income inequality in that income inequality and unemployment have a positive impact on poverty and a negative impact on personal income and level of education (Apergis et al., 2011). They go on to say per capita, income and the level of education have a positive and statistically significant impact.

According to the website Inequality.org, income inequality refers to the income gap between the rich and everyone else in the United States (Inequality.org, n.d.). Caceres and Caceres (2015) also agree that underemployment can lead to persistent poverty.

Underemployment and Race/Ethnicity

In an article by Slack et al. (2020), the authors call to attention that high underemployment has been a chronic structural feature of the United States for decades. Their study focuses on metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas including White, Black, and Hispanic workers. In their study, underemployment was higher for nonmetropolitan Black workers, and Hispanic workers faced an elevated risk of underemployment. They also found that the underlying risk of underemployment has increased in metropolitan

and nonmetropolitan areas over the past five decades (Slack et al., 2020). Their study, which spans the past 50 years, highlights the Black-White difference in underemployment, which averaged 16.9% in nonmetropolitan areas and 12.6% in metropolitan areas (the number of nonmetropolitan Black workers that are disadvantaged is 9% higher than their metropolitan Black counterparts) (Slack et al., 2020).

Another group to consider is Hispanic workers in comparison to white workers in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan settings over the same period. The difference in Hispanics and Whites in underemployment is Hispanics average about 10.5 percentage points in nonmetropolitan areas and Whites average about 11.1% points in metropolitan areas (Slack et al., 2020).

DeJong and Madamba (2001) introduced the results of their study of underemployment and found that underemployment is greater overall among females than males. Black workers' and Hispanic workers' underemployment rates were higher in comparison to non-Hispanic whites, and Asians displayed the highest job mismatch (DeJong & Madamba, 2001). It is important to define and investigate whether there are different forms of underemployment.

Relationship Between Unemployment to Underemployment

One indicator in determining whether a worker is underemployed is if they are working part-time involuntarily and would rather be working in a full-time position. The second determining factor of underemployment is a worker in a work condition that is considered as low-wage work. The third and final indicator is when an individual is working in a job or position that is a professional mismatch (Ur Rehman et al., 2021).

Understanding these underemployment characteristics provides clarity when assessing and determining whether a worker is underemployed.

The Department of Labor provides figures on the unemployment rates. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, the U.S. unemployment rate was 6.9%, and the unemployed rate was 11.1 million in October 2020 (Chen et al., 2021). However, there is still the question of underemployment. While the unemployment rate is lower, which indicates more individuals are becoming employed, is there a need to consider the underemployed? If those entering or returning to the workforce do so, in low-wage and involuntarily part-time positions for which they are overqualified, they are vulnerable to underemployment.

Underemployment and Recent College Graduates

One group to consider in relation to underemployment are recent college graduates who have obtained their undergraduate or graduate degree. Cunningham (2016) studied genres of underemployment and says that college graduate underemployment (CGU) has increased across the United States. Cunningham (2016) suggests the problem of CGU and underemployment begins prior to college for the college graduate.

Cunningham (2016) describes underemployment with the characteristics of a mismatch between the degree held and their position as well as the gap in wages with other individuals with the same degree and lack of skill utilization. McKee-Ryan (2016) defines *underemployment* as being employed in a job that reflects a significant pay cut from a previous position or working in a position that pays less than other workers with similar education and experience. They also describe *underemployment* as working at a lower level in an organization, working part-time, working in a contingent position, or

having more skills than required for the job (McKee-Ryan, 2016). Smith (1986) uses Sullivan and Cogg's description of underemployment, that begin accepting part-time work in the absence of full-time employment.

A question to consider is, are college graduates finding jobs that are compatible with their degree and education that do not categorize them as underemployment? Abel et al. (2014) discuss how the onset of the Great Recession and a sluggish labor market had an effect on college graduates finding employment suited to their level of education (Abel et al., 2014). They go on to say that recent graduates are having difficulty finding jobs, and those that do find jobs are accepting positions that are low-wage positions. Another issue that college graduates face is taking jobs after graduation that they are overqualified for or that do not require a postsecondary education (James & Vecchio, 2013).

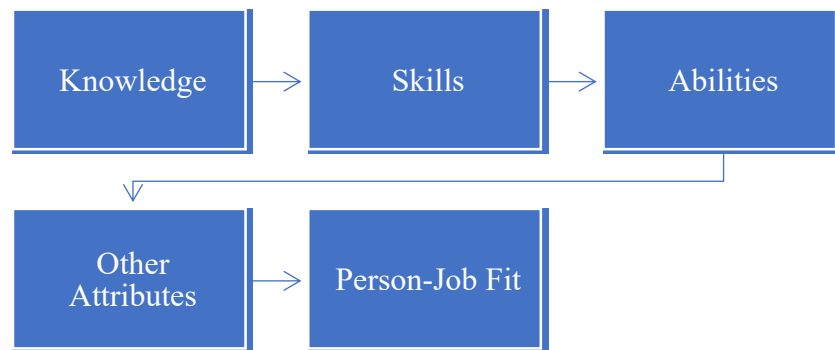
Craig (2016) introduces a phenomenon called the *skills gap*, which is described as the gap between the skills student graduates have and what skills businesses and employers require, which can eventually lead to poor employment outcomes. Craig (2016) goes on to say that clear and low-risk pathways are required for students between college and employment, and most employers and institutions of higher education are not equipped to construct effective pathways. Students in higher education are only one category of individuals seeking employment. Clear pathways to employment can be an answer to the issues of underemployment for not only college graduates but others who are trying to obtain sustainable employment.

Person-job (P-J) fit is one concept used to match individuals to a job. College students can also use the P-J concept to help guide in job selection after college.

Thompson et al. (2015) describe P-J fit as being an integral part of job selection when all the individual's KSAO (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes) match the requirements of the job (Figure 1). It has also shown to decrease work stress, turnover intentions, increase job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Knowing the P-J fit concept is important because just as P-J fit helps to match an individual to a job, the individual can also be a misfit or mismatch for a job.

Figure 1

Person-Job (P-J) Fit



Impact of Underemployment

Cunningham (2016) brings to light the difficulties in measuring underemployment because some may underutilize their skills for assorted reasons. The impact of underemployment includes elevated levels of job dissatisfaction, lower pay, and psychological effects (Jackson & Collings, 2018). This could cause workers to seek opportunities to upskill, reskill, or seek other employment.

Upskilling and Reskilling

Contextualizing Upskilling

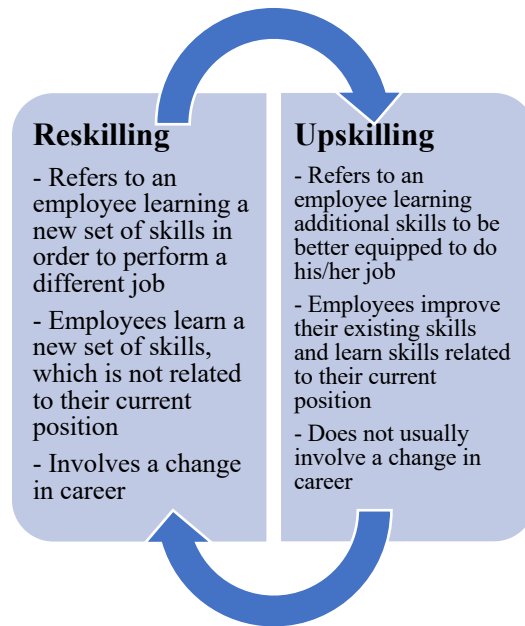
Cohen (2019) verbalizes that upskilling has become a corporate priority for hiring, developing, and retaining the best talent to improve on behalf of customers. When individuals are underemployed, to effectively upskill, training is imperative to retrain for higher-paying positions. It is imperative that employees investigate where the job market is going and train to where the jobs are going, and not the direction they think the job should be going.

Currently, and going into the future, Acemoglu and Restrepo predict the use of industrial robots that is expected to rise to 4-6 million by 2025, and human-machine augmentation will evolve in this technological society (Peters, 2020). This is just one of the signs of the change of time and technology.

Digital globalization in business has introduced such concepts as same-day delivery and robotics (Peters, 2020). Here is where the art of reskilling comes into play. Reskilling requires developing new skills to keep up with the growing demands of technological changes in the workforce today. To provide a clearer understanding and description of reskilling and upskilling Figure 2 provides a visual model of the two concepts.

Figure 2

Reskilling versus Upskilling



Contextualizing Reskilling

In the year 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work took on the identity of a new norm for working environments. *Fast Company* reported that “the 2019 edition of LinkedIn’s Workforce Learning Report found that 94% of employees said that employer-provided learning opportunities would entice them to stay longer at a company” (Fitzhugh-Craig, 2021, p. 38). This introduces the new idea of upskilling and reskilling.

Companies are starting to investigate this new idea to attract employees to their company. Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company has a plan to invest \$160 million over a five-year period into a reskilling and upskilling program called Future of Work (ATD Staff, 2020). These types of programs are created to appeal to those seeking employment

who need to better their knowledge and skills, or to help those who are already employed develop skills to further their current careers.

Because of the pandemic, reskilling is gaining momentum and is increasing in demand, which employers believe will result in them gaining and maintaining excellent quality employees. There was a rise of furloughs, layoffs, employee reduction, and working from home as offices closed because of the drastic changes introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lund et al., 2021). *The State of Skills 2021: Endangered* research report surveyed 5200 people around the world to assess how global events have affected workforce skills. Their results showed that 6 in 10 workers reported the pandemic has enhanced their need to acquire new skills for employment (Blanchard, 2021). Reskilling and upskilling are not only a local problem but are a global problem.

Employers today must recognize that upskilling and reskilling are the key to boosting employee retainment or enticing new employees. One of the major issues is lack of resources to the upskilling and reskilling initiatives (Cole, 2018). Reskilling, formerly called retraining, which involves learning new skills to prepare for a new job, can be a valuable investment for not only displaced workers but also for society (Jacobson et al., 2005). Reskilling improves the morale and retention for workers who want to learn new skills and increase in job development (Rogers et al., 2021).

Barriers to Employment

Because workers have differing reasons for unemployment and underemployment, barriers exist that delay or obstruct their possibilities in seeking employment. Some of the barriers that exist are adjustment to the changing job market,

potential need to train, social and psychological support from substance abuse, reassessment of skills for possible career changes, and transportation (Russell, 2011).

Why do individuals who are working low-paying jobs feel afraid to apply for jobs that they qualify for, that will pay higher wages, and that could help move them out of poverty? The unemployment and underemployment issues remain a significant factor in the number of persons living at or below the poverty threshold. As of 2021, the U. S. Department of Human Services estimates that for a family of four in 2021, an annual income of \$26,500 (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [ASPE], 2022) is needed to meet their basic needs. In 2019, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's data, there were 34.0 million people in poverty (Semega et al., 2020). Income levels are just one of the key factors that could contribute to poverty in the United States.

Barriers for the Employed

Often it is assumed that those who are employed do not face barriers because they have a steady income and health insurance to meet their needs and the needs for their families. Those who are employed at times can upskill or reskill to newer positions that could pay more in salary, but they face a war against the select few. The solutions to upskilling/reskilling and career development are learning to gain productivity, engagement, and retention; however, it will not work if companies only focus on a select few (Flynn, 2022).

Cole (2018) asks why organizations' upskilling and reskilling efforts are not more effective. In the study, 54% of respondents indicated that the lack of resources is a key stumbling block to effective upskilling and reskilling programs as well as a lack of commitment by an organization's senior leadership. Limited opportunities to

upskill/reskill in current jobs or positions could be considered a barrier to employment.

Upskilling/reskilling openings can be a career pathway that leads to more income as well as more job promotion opportunities.

Barriers for the Underemployed

Kim and Golden (2022) describe underemployment as those who work 35 hours per week or less (part-time employment) but are available for and would prefer to work more hours. Working part-time and desiring to work full-time can cause a barrier in employment. Workers often face challenges and obstacles while working part-time to meet the needs of their family. One challenge could be working a second job to provide income to help make ends meet.

Mental and physical health challenges, stress, and depression are other factors that can contribute to barriers to the underemployed (Rosenthal et al., 2012). Rosenthal et al. (2021) conducted a survey of adults in six low resource communities. They discovered that those employed full-time reported less damaging psychological factors and health behaviors to include challenges such as low levels of stress, depression, unhealthy eating, smoking, and drinking (Rosenthal et al., 2012).

Barriers for the Unemployed

The unemployed population also face barriers to employment. The unemployed are classified as individuals who are currently not employed, have actively searched for a job in the past 4 weeks, and are available for work (Hentz, n.d.). Actively searching for work while remaining available for work can be discouraging. This leads to some of the barriers to employment. There are factors that can play into this phenomenon. Some jobs

may require occupational licensing and fees, which can be a hardship when there is no income flow (King & Kralik, n.d.).

When job searchers are categorized in the low-income bracket, other barriers may include housing, clothing, food, transportation, and childcare arrangements if the job seeker has children. Barriers have a direct impact on the attainment of adequate employment to meet the needs of an individual and/or spouse and children. In a study by Hong et al. (2014) other barriers to employment were discovered such as: age, housing, food insecurity, physical and mental health, fear of rejection, personal, family, childcare, transportation, housing, job quality, chemical dependency, prolonged welfare dependency, and English not being the primary language.

Individuals with severe mental illness (SMI) and criminal justice involvement (CJI) face employment barriers. The unemployment rate for individuals with mental illness is as high as 90%, the highest unemployment rate of any disability group (Sveinsdottir & Bond, 2020). Sveinsdottir and Bond (2020) completed a study of 87 people with SMI and CJI and found that common barriers of employment for this group include: failure to engage in vocational services, disengagement from vocational services, physical health problems, symptoms of mental illness, cognitive problems, family problems, gaps in services, transportation, lack of prerequisites for work, lack of social skills, criminal justice systems problems, housing problems/homelessness, behavior problems, and substance abuse or dependence. The top three barriers were failure to engage, disengagement, and substance abuse. These top barriers were identified by two employment programs.

Ex-offenders face barriers to employment because they are often released without assistance for community living and face challenges and obstacles with reentry (Harrison & Schehr, 2004). This population faces additional barriers, such as hiring policies that restrict individuals with criminal records and convicted criminal offenses that hinder working in certain job settings and locations (Harrison & Schehr, 2004).

Persons with disabilities also face employment barriers. Sundar et al. (2018) completed a study and reported that stigma and negative attitudes of employers to persons with disabilities is a major barrier. They go on to discuss the common misconceptions of managers and administrators as a possible bias towards persons with disabilities seeking employment. Persons with disabilities are not always considered for career development, advancement opportunities, or leadership positions because of the misconception that they are not capable of holding strong leadership positions within an organization (Sundar et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The overall literature provides critical insight into the potential positive gains of reskilling and upskilling for both employees and their employers. The research further indicates that the economic benefits to employers and their families is sufficient for them to experience upward economic mobility that moves them beyond established poverty guidelines. However, the literature does highlight several factors that serve as barriers and obstacles to upskilling and reskilling for the underemployed and unemployed. These barriers include housing, clothing, food, transportation, childcare, training, substance abuse, lack of skills, lack of resources, part-time to full-time employment, age, criminal background, lack of education, work experience, homelessness, mental health, stress,

physical disabilities, depression, and job search. The literature also shows that persons with disabilities face major obstacles and barriers to employment.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived influence, potential impact, and benefits that upskilling, and reskilling have on the underemployed and unemployed worker. In addition, this study seeks to explore whether the perceived benefits of upskilling and reskilling include moving above the poverty line and therefore, out of poverty in real and sustainable ways. This study is qualitative in nature and utilized structured face-to-face and virtual Zoom interviews with individuals who were underemployed and question what are the barriers that kept them from upskilling/reskilling to higher paid positions.

WSWCT was granted a \$250,000 grant to look at underemployment among individuals who can upskill or reskill to improve their economic competitiveness (Workforce Solutions, 2021). WSWCT is an organization that assists individuals in job training, workforce education, assistance in job search, resumes, preparing for interviews, GED assistance, financial aid, scholarships and educational initiatives for adults (Workforce Solutions, n.d.).

WSWCT completed an American community survey with data representing 2014-2018, which included a labor force of 143,589 and a participation rate of 55.9% of individuals 25 to 64 years old (Workforce Solutions, 2021). The results of this survey indicated there were approximately 19.3% of individuals in the workforce who had

earned a bachelor's degree or higher, which by comparison is 13.6% lower than the national average of 32.9%, and 10.7% lower than the average for the State of Texas. These numbers suggest an opportunity for upskilling and reskilling in the Abilene and surrounding areas, which may improve the economic competitiveness of employees currently inside and outside the workforce (Workforce Solutions, 2021).

Research Design

In this chapter, I present the methodology design, data collection procedures, instruments, and participant population for this exploratory qualitative research study. The reason for selecting a qualitative research design is found in the purpose and intention of qualitative research. The exploratory nature and intent of this study is a good fit for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research has several advantages that provide high value for this research study. Qualitative research allows the interviewee to express thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions in a particular study (Kekeya, 2021).

There are three types of interview techniques: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews contain questions with pre-set categories and/or open-ended questions; semi-structured interviews are a set of broad questions that are uncategorized and guide conversations; and unstructured interviews refers to interviews that do not have a set of questions, but a list of issues, topics, or prompts related to the nature of the study (Kekeya, 2021). For this study, I used the structured interview process.

There are differences in using qualitative data for research versus quantitative data, which is determined by the purpose of the study. Quantitative data are collected through measuring things, analyzed through numerical comparisons and statistical

inferences, and reported through statistical analyses while qualitative data were collected through participant observation, interviews, and analyzed by themes from descriptions by informants (McLeod, 2019). Qualitative research was chosen for this study because one-on-one personal interviews were conducted to gather information and was the best fit for this type of study.

Data Collection

The researcher went through the process of gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before conducting the interviews (Appendix A). All interviewees were read a consent form (Appendix B) and explained their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher used a qualitative research approach for all information collected from the one-on-one personal interviews. The original goal of the study was to interview 100 participants; however, due to time constraints, only 60 interviews were conducted. The client information was deidentified to protect the privacy of those interviewed. The data collected were categorized into themes based on the questions asked. The results of the study are presented narratively, using tables as informative to the study. The findings were recorded in narrative form and direct quotations were used for the responses that require additional explanation.

Instrument

The type of instrument utilized for this study was one-on-one personal interviews. Face-to-face interviews are more personable and connect with the individual on a personal level. The instrument consists of a section on participant demographics and a section covering research content. There were five primary interview questions followed

by follow-up sub-questions used to probe for additional information needed for data collection and analysis (Appendix C). WSWCT approved the interviews conducted by the researcher representing the agency (Appendix D).

The length of an instrument is influential in determining if participants will complete surveys or questions. Therefore, the researcher focused on five brief questions. This study was a qualitative study. Qualitative studies are typically about what, how, and why of a situation, versus answering questions that normally ask how many or how much. Quantitative studies rely on careful, standardized measurement of variables and construction of a new data collection instrument (Yegedis et al., 2018). The steering committee suggested using five questions in the interview process as this process was more personal and applicants were more apt to participate. The researcher created the questions based on information provided by the committee and data information needed to conduct this study.

The interviews were conducted off campus at partner agencies in the Taylor and Nolan County targeted areas. WSWCT, West Central Texas Adult Education, Goodwill of Abilene, Arrow Ford dealership, Cisco College, International Rescue Center, the Texas Veterans employment services, Men of Nehemiah, and Texas State Technical College are a few partner agencies that provided at least ten individuals to interview. Every necessary precaution was taken to maintain confidentiality of each participant. The data participants provided were anonymous, and no identifying characteristics were distributed or shared with anyone outside of the researchers. The interviewees were assigned a number at the interview location. The researcher read the consent form and participants verbally stated if they consent to the study. The researcher interviewed the

participants and only gathered basic non-identifying information such as race, gender, age, employment status, current skills, skills they wish to obtain, and barriers to employment. The data of the participants was protected on a password protected computer that the researcher maintained. The researcher exercised integrity when recording and storing the data of those interviewed. The availability of the data is for the members of the steering committee.

The interviews were structured interviews and the participants were asked one open-ended question. The researcher documented the answers to all questions on paper and transcribed the data into like themes. Proper quotes were used to provide the true responses of those interviewed. Most of the data was recorded in narrative form and some data was statistical data such as biographical information. This research was a descriptive research to show how there were a variety of ways that the participants experienced and perceived underemployment, unemployment, upskilling, reskilling, and barriers to employment. The interviews were conducted in a private meeting room provided by the partner agencies to ensure the privacy of the interviewees and the protection of the data that was collected.

Participant Population

Personal interviews were the research methodology used to evaluate the research model that was developed based on the literature review. The research age category was 19 to 65 years of age. All participants were selected from the various agencies represented on the steering committee. The participants consisted of up to ten individuals per agency who volunteered to participate in the study. Each agency gathered the ten participants and provided the private space for the researcher to conduct the interviews.

The duration of the interviews ranged between 20 to 30 minutes based on the participants' responses. There were two primary goals that guided this approach. The first goal was to conduct one-on-one personal interviews instead of surveys. This was to ensure that accurate information was received by using a more personal approach to gather information. Using this approach allowed the subject to elaborate on the questions asked and provided clarity and concise data. The second goal was to discover the true barriers individuals faced who were categorized as underemployed and remained in their current job instead of choosing to upskill or reskill to higher paid positions.

The researcher used the solution focused therapy approach as one of the questions during the interview. This question is known as the miracle question. This question prompted participants to describe what they believe their lives would be like if the problem or troubles they face in their lives was eliminated, and how they would come up with their own solutions ("What is solution-focused therapy?" 1997). This allowed the interviewee to tell their story about how their lives would/will differ if they did not have the barriers of income or employment issues. This was done by asking the "miracle question": if you went to bed this evening and a miracle took place overnight and there were no limitations to employment, what would you do? The researcher recorded the answers on paper as the researcher has experience in interviewing and recording responses to clients interviewed. An exploratory design was used as this study of reskilling is limited and is a newer idea.

The WSWCT Board granted permission to conduct the interviews and use the data collected for creating career pathways to meet the needs of the unemployed/underemployed as shown on Appendix C. Prior to starting the interview, the

informed consent was read, explained, and each participant was given the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time. See Appendix D for the informed consent form. Participants were informed that their responses will be used to help with creating career pathways and will not be shared with any other entities.

Data Analysis Strategy

Qualitative data analysis consists of analyzing data in a research question and organizing the data within the research question (Sale, 2022). It also described the relationships and themes discovered in the responses from interviews conducted. Participants in this study had an opportunity to tell their story on their employment journey based on the research questions asked. The responses helped to create common themes and highlight analytical directions to go in reporting the data. There were many stories told based on the 60 participants. During the initial coding, repetitive responses and answers were examined to determine similarities and differences in the data. Secondly, labels were utilized to categorize words and phrases to determine patterns of the responses that led to a deeper theme underneath the data. For example, a response of fear has a deeper meaning and understanding based on the background circumstance of the interviewee. Question 5 addressed the barriers to employment. The initial response was fear but then the interviewee went on to further explain circumstances that caused the fear, such as reentry from incarceration.

Researcher used the inductive reasoning approach which is the process of drawing inferences or conclusions from evidence (Stephens et al., 2018). Participants were interviewed about barriers to employment and the data was analyzed to detect patterns in responses.

Summary

In this chapter, the method of this study is being introduced. Qualitative was chosen over quantitative research based on face-to-face interviews. The qualitative approach has a distinctive touch because participants are interviewed one-on-one instead of using surveys. There were five structured questions asked and were accompanied by sub questions to generate more detailed discussion.

The steering committee generated a list of potential sources of appropriate subjects from the various agencies in the community. Each agency was tasked with providing ten participants from the agency to ensure a broad range of ethnic backgrounds were represented in the study. No names were taken during the interview, only biographical information was collected such as age, gender, and ethnic background. To analyze the data, the answers to the questions were coded based on narrative form and direct quotes to organize themes and like patterns.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings from the interviews conducted by the researcher were explained in detail. A total of sixty individuals participated in the one-on-one personal interviews. Each interview lasted 15 to 20 minutes each. This totaled over 1200 minutes of interviewing and data collection. The responses were stored in a password protected computer to ensure all information was kept confidential. Names were not taken during the interview, only demographic information.

Data Analysis and Coding

Upon completion of the interviews, I gathered all the responses and transcribed and typed them into a Word document. I went through three levels of coding to extract the common themes. I read the responses from the participants and took notes and categorized them into groups. I then highlighted common responses, phrases, and quotes by color and color coded them into categories. This process is known as “coding” and was used to capture the ideas and feelings expressed by the participants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Next, I separated the key words and phrases that had like patterns that occurred in the data and used this to create themes. Once I coded them all, I began to compare the phrases to each other to determine similarities and differences. This allowed me to define and name the themes. The participants were questioned and asked about the barriers that were obstacles to their employment journey. The varied answers were categorized and broken down into five themed categories.

Descriptive Analyses

The steering committee for the Trellis Grant initially set the goal of completing 100 one-on-one interviews. At the three-month cutoff point, 60 interviews had been conducted, and the decision was made to suspend further interviews for the time being. The demographic information collected is described from the 60 participants who contributed information for the upskill/reskill initiative.

Demographic Description

The participants were asked basic demographic information such as gender, age, and ethnic background at the beginning of the interview. It was once again emphasized that the information provided would remain anonymous because names were not collected during the interview process.

Gender

The gender breakdown of the 60 participants was 36 (60%) were male and 24 (40%) were female. Of the 36 who were male, 11 were White, nine were Black, eight were Hispanic, five were Afghan, two were African, one was Asian American, and one was Bermudian. Of the 24 who were female, nine were Hispanic, seven were White, five were Black, and one was Asian American.

Age

The next demographic question asked was the participant's age, which was broken down in age categories (Table 3). The age group represents participants' ages divided into 10-year increments, with the exception of the age group 19–20 years of age, which is a two-year increment. The highest age group interviewed was 51–60 years of

age, which was a total of 16 (26.7%), and the lowest age group was 61 years of age and older, which was three (5%) of the 60 participants.

Table 3

Participant Age

Age Category	<i>n</i>	%
Age 19-20 years old	4	6.7
Age 21-30 years old	15	25
Age 31-40 years old	13	21.6
Age 41-50 years old	9	15
Age 51-60 years old	16	26.7
Age 61 and older	3	5

Employment Status

The next question posed to each participant was their current employment status. Each participant was given a description of the definition of the terms employed, unemployed, and underemployed. Table 4 breaks down the responses as to whether the participants were employed, unemployed, or underemployed. Of the 60 participants, 36 (60%) stated they were currently employed, 22 (36.7%) stated they were unemployed, and two (3.3%) stated they were underemployed. Only two participants were categorized as underemployed; however, this number could be higher as some participants stated they were satisfied in their current job position, but met the definition of underemployed status.

Table 4

Employment Status

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Employed	36	60
Unemployed	22	36.7
Underemployed	2	3.3

Ethnicity

One of the goals of the interviews was to ensure that as many ethnic backgrounds were represented in the study (Table 5). The ethnicity with the highest number of participants interviewed was White with 18 (30%); the second highest number was Black with 14 (23.3%); and the lowest number was Asian American with one (1.7%), and Bermudian with one (1.7%).

Table 5

Ethnicity

Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%
White	18	30
Black	14	23.3
Hispanic	13	21.7
Afghan Immigrants	4	6.7
African Immigrants	3	5
Native	2	3.3
Latina	2	3.3
Mexican	2	3.3
Asian American	1	1.7
Bermudian	1	1.7

Skills Description

The participants were also questioned on their current skills. Employability skills are key to the success of hiring for long-term employment. Some of the employable skills needed when searching for employment are; organizational skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, communication skills, initiative, self-management skills, technology skills, and interpersonal skills (Wolfe, n.d.). These skills are considered as “transferable skills” and can be used in any job or profession (Wolfe, n.d.).

Some of the responses by participants were desired skills that they wish to obtain for employment search. Several participants desired to obtain their GED to begin their

search for employment. Another common response for desired skills to obtain was computer skills. Several expressed the technology world has changed in the past several years and a need to obtain training in this area was high.

Although there were several participants that expressed a desire to learn new skills, a sizable number revealed the certifications that they already had in their possession. The main certification obtained from multiple participants was forklift licensing. In the industry world, this is a certification that is needed.

Desire for Upskilling/Reskilling

One of the goals of this study was to find individuals who are interested in upskilling or reskilling at their current employment. Based on the findings, there was a limited amount who were interested in upskilling. The researcher explained the definition of upskilling and reskilling during the interview process. Amongst the number who were employed, seven were interested in reskilling and ten were interested in upskilling.

Qualitative Responses

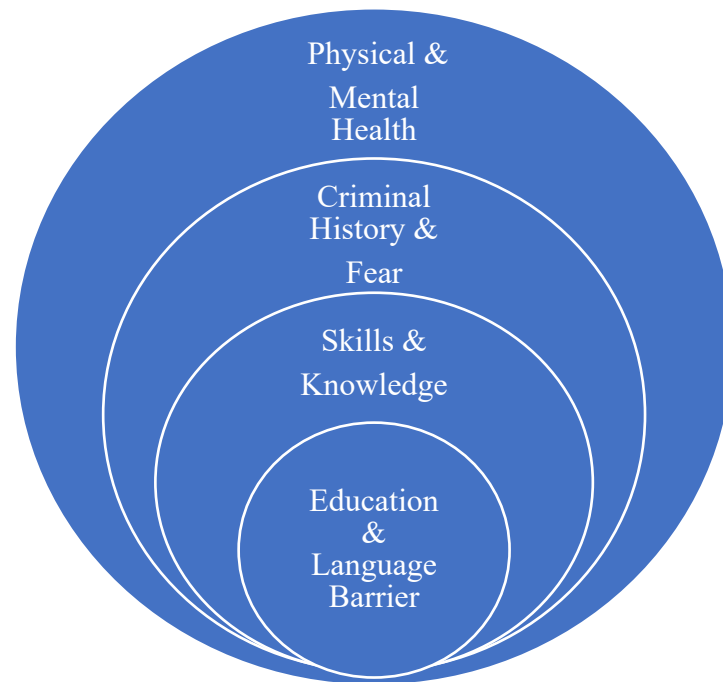
The fifth question for the research was a “dream question” that prompts the interviewee to think about the dream job that they could have with no limitations. When participants were asked the dream question, some responded with a huge smile on their face. However, there was a heaviness on the faces of a small number of participants as they thought about this question. When the participants were asked to envision their dream job, there was a clear change in disposition. The main purpose of the one-on-one interviews was to get the true answers of employment barriers the participants face.

Although the dream question investigated what the person would love to do, it also helped to identify if the person was comfortable in their current employment or if

they wished to upskill or reskill. Some of the responses prompted the interviewee to look beyond their current employment and envision where they want to be if the vision does not match the position they currently hold. Figure 3 shows the topmost common responses.

Figure 3

Top Barriers to Employment



Health and Mental Health

The data revealed that several health issues were a common theme for males, females, and all ethnic groups. Some of the health concerns were mental and physical disabilities. One female participant stated, “I feel my mental health will keep me from getting a job I can maintain. I start jobs and then I have mental breakdowns which cause me to leave the job before being employed for a month.” This same participant also pointed out that because her employment status was not stable, she does not have health

insurance, which leads to her not having the proper medication. A 54-year-old male stated:

I owned my own company for 18 years and was injured on the job. I am confined to a wheelchair and have a tough time finding a job. I completed a job application and they asked if I was disabled and if I was receiving Social Security benefits. The next question asked was who was managing my ticket to work. I completed another application with another company that claimed they helped people with disabilities. I did not hear from this company for 18 months. I finally found this job working the front desk. I like this company because they help people with disabilities.

This gentleman expressed the challenges of finding employment with his disability. He has a degree and employment skills; however, his disability has been a barrier to employment for him.

Criminal Background/Fear

The next theme is choices made in the past that affect current employment applications. Participants who were interviewed from the Men of Nehemiah are individuals who have been torn apart by poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, crime and violence; they are offered training, addiction treatment, mentoring, job readiness training, case management, and other recovery support services (Men of Nehemiah, n.d.). The participants were asked, what is hindering you from pursuing your dream job? One unemployed male in the reentry program stated, “there is nothing stopping me, it just seems so far out there, and I don’t have the confidence to go for the job because of past unwise choices.” There were four participants in the reentry program that were well-

trained, educated, and certified. Of the four, two have forklift, plumbing, and medical licensing but felt bad choices in the past with drug addiction and a criminal record was a huge setback and barrier to obtaining employment. One well-educated unemployed participant who had a drug addiction stated:

I need to put more effort and attention into drug rehab right now. I want to find out my reasons for making the bad choices that I make while I am in this program. Sometimes I do not know if I am happy, sad, or whatever.

Three participants expressed that they want to be drug and alcohol abuse counselors because of their bad choices. The next question asked of the participants was, what is your barrier to employment? One 21-year-old participant stated:

I am my only barrier. I have several felonies on my record, and I keep getting into trouble. I would love to learn plumbing or sheetrock construction. I have experience in appliance repair, but I really want to be a counselor for mental illness to help others not to make the same bad choices that I have made.

Another participant expressed, "I am fearful of applying for jobs because of my criminal background and I am afraid of not being able to maintain the job because of my past choices." A 40-year-old male stated, "I am trainable, and I am willing to be trained. I made some bad choices and decisions, and I am afraid to apply for jobs."

A 19-year-old female who is getting her GED stated:

I am trying to get a GED. I have a fear of going for jobs. I am afraid of the demand of the job. I really want to work in the police force. I am afraid to go for this job because I do not know how to use machines or have math skills.

Under the umbrella of fear was the notion of self-confidence. A 24-year-old female going for her GED stated:

I need my GED and I feel this will help me advance in this job. I was looking at a different position and they told me to get my GED so I can have advancement in the company. My self-confidence is low, so I am afraid to apply for the position.

Several participants expressed that they wanted to upskill or skill in the jobs they are currently working but their self-confidence or fear is hindering them. Also, those who had addictions and past criminal histories are immobilized by their choices and do not apply for jobs for which they are qualified.

Skills/Knowledge

Although there were several participants that have experience, there were others who expressed their barrier to employment as they felt like they did not have enough experience or lack skills and knowledge. One unemployed female participant stated:

I have been unemployed for 5 months. I have good customer service skills, computer skills and technical support skills, however, I cannot find a job that pays well. I am currently going to school to learn better English because my language barrier also hinders me from getting my dream job.

A group of participants from a local church were interviewed and asked the five interview questions. One employed male felt he was underemployed and had talents and skills to offer, but he was overlooked for employment opportunities. He stated:

It is all in knowing where the jobs are. I am overqualified for several jobs because of my degree. I looked for jobs and when I revealed I had a degree, I was immediately told I was overqualified. There were times that I applied for a job,

and I had the skills that met the qualifications for hire, but others were hired based on a relational connection. I have learned that networking is more important than job skills. The job I am currently working has nothing to do with my qualifications.

A 57-year-old male stated, “I had skills and training in the past to be a truck driver. Because I was caught up in drugs and went to a drug treatment program, I lost my license. I would love to get my license renewed and go back to truck driving.”

Language/Education

A group of participants were interviewed from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an agency that helps refugees, asylees, victims of abuse, human trafficking, survivors of torture, and other immigrants to thrive in America (International Rescue Committee, n.d.). All eight of the participants interviewed expressed that the language barrier was a hindrance to employment. Each participant had an interpreter that assisted in the interview process. Four of the eight were from a foreign country and came from severe attacks. Because of the severity of their situation, their country will not be mentioned, and they will be identified as “foreigners.” The foreigners were initially afraid to participate in the interviews because they thought the researcher was a reporter and would air the interviews. They believed the media exposure would identify the foreigner’s location and the soldiers from their country would find them and have them killed. The researcher assured the foreigners their identity would be protected. After this reassurance, the foreigners agreed to participate in the interviews. A 29-year-old foreigner stated:

I am currently working at Church's Chicken, but the hours and pay is not enough to take care of my family. I do not know English, so I am having a challenging time applying for other jobs. In my country I was a bodyguard for a commander, and I also owned my own restaurant. I was the first refugee to come here from my country. Because of the severity of the attacks and my escape, I had a heart attack when I reached the United States. My health concerns and my language barrier stop me from getting jobs that pay more.

A 46-year-old foreigner stated:

Back in my country I worked in sanitation and drove trucks. During an attack while trying to escape, shrapnel hit my eyes and disabled one of my eyes. Because I cannot use my license in the United States and my language barrier, I have a tough time finding a job. I have a wife and ten kids and really need more money.

A 53-year-old female from Africa is currently working; however, she stated:

I want to go for higher jobs but because I do not know English, this hinders me from getting jobs paying more. I was a certified nurse in my country, but my home burned down in the village where I lived, and my license was also burned.

Twenty of the 60 participants interviewed expressed their education was an employment barrier. I interviewed ten participants from Adult Education, and they are currently getting their GED because they applied for jobs in the past and faced roadblocks because of their education. Four of the foreigners were well educated in their country but were having challenges getting their education translated to the United States. One 29-year-old male from a foreign country stated, "I have a bachelor's degree from my

country, but I had to flee quickly and did not have my degree with me. I have a job, but it is low paying and I know I could be paid more if I had a degree.”

Time/Age

In this study, age was a barrier based on being too young or too old. Ageism in the workforce can cause barriers to employment. Every individual should have a right to employment regardless of their age and should be free from discrimination, however, many practices and policies do not appear to uphold this right in the labor market (Mirza et al., 2021). A 64-year-old female participant stated:

My age is an employment barrier for me. Most employers look for the younger generation and hesitate with someone older because of their age and medical issues. I recently just started a job part-time sitting with the elderly, but I am qualified to do more, but my age hinders me.

A 19-year-old female stated:

I just came out of Abilene Hope Haven after graduation from high school and I want to do graphic design. I cannot get a job because of my age and inexperience. I just got a job sitting at a desk calling workers when their appointments arrive but that is not really what I want to do.

A 45-year-old male states, “I want to be a doctor, but I feel my age will hinder me from being a doctor because I need lots of education.” A 67-year-old female was a walk-in participant from WSWCT. She stated, “I have worked several professional jobs in the past but now my age hinders me from getting a decent job. I know the ends and outs of jobs, but no one will hire me because of my age.”

Time was another common theme. Four participants expressed they did not have the time or did not take the time to pursue employment or better employment.

Underneath the theme of time, a few expressed procrastinations as a barrier. There was an expression of wanting to pursue better employment but just not taking the steps and the time to do so. A 37-year-old male stated:

My barrier is making time to plan for searching for the job I want. I just do not make the time. I just gained my citizenship and I spent so much time working on that process that I have not made the time to pursue a job.

A 53-year-old male states, "I am currently working on my degree, and am in the process of working on my qualifications, but I just do not have the time. That is my barrier to employment." A 36-year-old female states, "I do not have the time to seek higher employment. I am a single parent and finances is my main barrier. I just have not taken the time to pursue something better."

Summary

There are multiple barriers to employment. This study addresses the barriers to employment of the sixty participants interviewed. The responses were recorded by the researcher on paper and then color coded based on patterns and themes. Of the 60 interviews, the employment barrier themes were categorized in five categories. The categories are health, choices and fear, skills and knowledge, language and education, and time and age. The health category included those who have physical health conditions and disabilities and those who have mental health difficulties. The choices and age category consisted of participants who made bad choices in the past that lead to incarceration or substance abuse. Because of criminal background, these participants

experienced fear applying for jobs because of the stigma of a criminal record which is required to be disclosed on most job applications. Twenty participants had various skills and knowledge but still considered this to be a barrier to employment. One participant expressed being overqualified to apply for jobs. Others did not have the skills but wished to obtain skills to apply for certain jobs. Lastly, time and age were factors for seven participants. The age barrier was pointed out by participants who were young and old. Time was the next theme which was expressed in three different angles from not taking the time, procrastination, and just not having enough time.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to discover the barriers that are facing individuals who are employed, unemployed, or underemployed and are challenged with pursuing higher income producing jobs. This study also sought to identify what current employment skills the participants have and if the skills are utilized in the current positions worked. Additionally, this study aimed to identify the research gap of those facing barriers to employment.

Interview question number 5 asks the participant what are the barriers to employment that are experienced? One of the themed barriers derived from this research is language barriers experienced by refugees coming into the United States. Guerrero and Rothstein (2012) speak about language and education barriers that affect skilled immigrants during their job search. In my research study, eight participants from foreign countries spoke about language barriers they have encountered during job search. Two participants stated they are employed but consider themselves to be underemployed because of the knowledge and skills obtained in their country but the language barrier experienced in the United States poses a barrier. Guerrero and Rothstein (2012) go on to say that immigrants are an understudied group that is growing in importance.

Another barrier addressed is health and disabilities. Fourteen participants expressed that a physical disability can be a barrier to employment. Graham et al. (2018) discuss how employment rates for individuals with disabilities remain lower than those

without disabilities and that 17.9% of persons with disabilities were employed compared to 65.3% without a disability. One participant stated that he has experienced barriers to employment when it comes to his disability. He stated, “I am confined to a wheelchair and have a tough time finding a job.” This statement supports the literature that persons with disabilities have more of a challenge with seeking employment than those without a disability. Another barrier in the category of health was mental illness. Sveinsdottir and Bond (2020) identified persons with severe mental illness and persons in the criminal justice system who face barriers to employment, and they connected that person’s with severe mental illness are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Seventeen participants who were incarcerated stated they face barriers derived from their criminal background. Sveinsdottir and Bond (2020) also point out that studies of various populations with severe mental illness express common barriers to employment which include symptoms of mental illness. One female participant interviewed expressed her concern for employment seeking based on her mental health, and how this is a barrier in her life in relation to keeping a job. Rosenthal et al. (2012) address the issue of unemployment and underemployment and express that this employment status has mental and physical health consequences that can lead to increased stress and depression.

There is very little empirical attention to the study of dually diagnosed persons with both substance use and mental health disorders (Laudet et al., 2002). Four participants interviewed expressed their disappointment in their past choices in substance abuse and how it has affected their current job search. At times substance abuse has led to incarceration which is another barrier that was uttered by five interviewed participants. The disappointment has caused one to go into a state of mental paralysis. One participant

stated, “my drug addiction has caused me to not know what state I am in mentally.”

Stigma is another barrier connected to employment by individuals recovering from substance abuse (Laudet et al., 2002). This also leads to the barrier of fear to pursue jobs with the thought in mind that full-time employment is not obtainable as expressed by one participant who made bad choices in the past with drugs and substance abuse. He stated, “I have prior skills from my previous employment but now that I’ve been in jail, I just feel like I can’t get that type of job now with my criminal history.”

Implications for Social Practice and Policy

Having income to provide for a family is of high importance for survival. To meet the financial needs of the family requires adequate income to cover basic expenses such as shelter, utilities, clothing, and food. When an individual is unemployed, finding a job that matches skills, knowledge, and provides sustainable income, can be challenging. When the barriers of substance abuse, mental illness or a criminal background history affect employment search, the roadblock can become a larger obstacle. From this study, the participants in reentry programs face barriers to employment based on their criminal background. There is a need for more community awareness about the specific employment needs and barriers of felons in programs such as the Men of Nehemiah program and other programs that are helping prior incarcerated individuals reenter into the community (Knollenberg & Martin, 2008). Franke et al. (2017) discuss how social work and the criminal justice system are intertwined, however, there is a need for more social work involvement in the criminal justice system in helping adults during the rehabilitation process.

Another barrier that face some participants was mental health issues and substance abuse. McCabe and Wahler (2016) addressed the need for more social workers to advocate for more treatment centers to treat individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) and mental health disorders and educate policy makers on the potential benefits of expansion. Social workers have the advocacy skills to help assist SUD's and mental health disorder individuals who are seeking employment and to help address the barriers they face. McCabe and Wahler (2016) also discuss the increased need for social work education programs in SUDs on both the micro and macro levels, to consider changes necessary to prepare graduation social work students for entering this field.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations to consider in this study. The demographics of the participants ranged in nature. The group that was represented from the IRC did not speak English, so an interpreter was provided. It was difficult to access their true barriers as at times the interpretation was not clear. For most the main barrier was language because it is a challenge to complete applications and apply for jobs not knowing English. Their current jobs were low paying jobs from food service entities where there was limited conversation or interaction with the public. Another limitation for the group is the sampling size which was small and did not represent the international group. Many participants in this group were very educated in their country and have high skill levels. They expressed it was difficult to translate some of their skills to jobs here in the United States. Another limitation is some were not U.S. citizens, and this limited the jobs they could obtain. Therefore, this did not indicate a true picture of barriers to upskilling and reskilling.

Another limitation was the participants were not all representative of the target population. Because of the limited time schedule of the researcher and coordination of school schedules of students in the local colleges, only a small group of college students were interviewed. Because of this, a true picture of the barriers of employment for college students was not represented. The impact of COVID-19 presented another limitation to this study as a large outbreak of the Omicron variant during this study caused individuals with exposure to quarantine for ten days at various times. The goal of this study was to reach 100 participants in ten different demographics backgrounds, however, time did not allow all groups to be represented in the study.

Future Research

An area that requires future research is addressing the biases of the employer. This study covered some of the barriers facing the unemployed, employed, and underemployed, however, a study of the barriers to employment for employers would be beneficial. What are some of the bias's employers have when reviewing job applications or interviewing applicants? Do the biases of employers affect applicants with prior criminal histories, disabilities, and lack of knowledge and skills?

Another area the requires future research is the transition of college graduates into employment. A college student goes to school to obtain a certain degree, but does the degree obtained prepare the graduate for employment? What are the barriers that face college graduates seeking employment?

Conclusion

Today, and in times in the past, having a sustainable income is of high priority to survive. To survive, basic needs must be met such as shelter, food, and clothing.

Employment and seeking employment are an important piece to the puzzle to help in daily living. This study brought to light barriers that face individuals on their quest for employment and seeking high paying salaries. For those who are currently employed in jobs that provide an income that barely meets the needs of daily living can upskill or reskill to higher paying positions but do not always take advantage of the chance to advance. During the one-on-one interviews of the participants, there was a common theme of employment barriers that the unemployed, employed, and underemployed face. The most common themes were lack of education and employment skills, criminal background history, and mental disorders and substance abuse. In some interviews it was observed that one barrier often feeds into another barrier. The participants that were interviewed from the Reentry program stated their criminal background history at times stemmed from substance abuse and eventually led to mental disorders, stress, and anxiety. After being out of the loop of society during imprisonment, technology changed, and this caused a barrier of lack of knowledge and skills. The most common barrier for refugees and participants from foreign countries were the language barrier.

In conclusion, below are several points to ponder.

- There is little empirical attention to the study of dually diagnosed persons with both substance use and mental health disorders (Laudet et al., 2002).
- Rosenthal et al. (2012) address the issue of unemployment and underemployment and express that this employment status has mental and physical health consequences that can lead to increased stress and depression.

- Sveinsdottir and Bond (2020) also point out that studies of various populations with mental illness express common barriers to employment that include symptoms of mental illness.
- There is a need for social workers to advocate for more treatment centers to treat individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) and mental health disorders.
- There is an increased need for social work education programs in SUDs.

Social issues for the lower-income, underserved, and overlooked populations is ongoing and deserves continual attention.

Conducting the one-on-one interviews brought to light the true barriers to employment from various ethnic backgrounds. Each participant was able to share stories of their employment journey. The unemployed, employed, and underemployed all face barriers to employment. This information is valuable to WSWCT to ensure pathways are created to help meet the needs of the population studied.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



Dear Roz,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 21-165)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Our Promise: ACU is a vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

21-165

Date of Approval: 11/19/2021

Informed consent form

Date: 11/11/2021

Study Name: Barriers to Upskilling for the Underemployed/unemployed

Researcher: Rosalind (Roz) M. Evans

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this study is to research the barriers and reasons for the underemployed/unemployed not upskilling to higher paying positions.

What you will be asked to do in the research: You will have a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will take approximately 30 minutes. During the interview you will be asked 5 questions to help gather data for the research.

Risks and Discomforts: Your primary risk of participating in this study is a breach of confidentiality. However, we have taken steps to minimize this risk. We will not collect any personal identification information during the interview. All information obtained during the interview will be stored on a secure device.

Benefits of the research and benefits to you: The interview questions will allow you to explore the barriers that you might have that are hindering you from going to the next level in employment that can increase your knowledge and skills as well as your income.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence any future employment decisions or any harm will be brought to you.

Withdrawal from the study: You may choose to stop participating in this study at any time, for any reason. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher, the Workforce Solutions, or any group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: All information recorded in this study will be kept confidential and will only be used for statistical purposes for this study. Your name will not be used in this study, only your biographical information such as age, gender, and ethnic background. All answers will be handwritten, and not recorded on a recording device. Your data will be safely stored, and only research staff will have access to the information. Confidentiality will be fully provided as possible by law.

Questions about the research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact lead researcher Roz Evans at Rosalind.evans@workforcesystem.org, 325-795-4310/1-800-457-5633 or Co-lead researcher Bill Dean at Bill.dean@workforcesystem.org, 325-795-4310/1-800-457-5633. If you have concerns about this study or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact **Dr. Megan Roth** (Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research at ACU) at megan.roth@acu.edu or 325-674-2885.

CONSENT INDICATION/Legal rights: I consent to participate in the Barriers to Upskilling/Reskilling for the underemployed/unemployed research for the Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas conducted by Roz Evans. I fully understand the nature of this project.

- ☐ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- ☐ I do not wish to participate in this study.

APPENDIX C

Five Interview Questions

The researcher will ask five questions during the interview process. These include:

1. What is your current employment status: employed, unemployed or underemployed?
2. Are you satisfied with your current employment status?
 - a. If employed, how long have you been at your current position?
 - b. If unemployed, how long have you been unemployed or searching for employment?
 - c. If you feel you are underemployed, what job interests you?
3. What are your current employment skills?
 - a. What skills are required for your current employment, or employment in the past 2 years?
 - b. Are there skills you wish to obtain?
 - c. Do you have any certifications?
4. Are you interested in learning new skills (upskilling) for work or gaining additional skills, certifications, returning to school (reskilling) for higher paying job opportunities?
5. What are your barriers for not seeking higher paying job positions or gaining additional skills for employment?
 - a. Miracle question: If you went to bed and had a dream about the job that you always wanted to do that had no limitations, what would it be?

APPENDIX D

Interview Approval from Workforce Solutions

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Providing resources for good jobs, strong employers, and a healthy regional economy.

October 28, 2021

To: Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Rosalind Evans is an Abilene Christian University Master's degree candidate working with the Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas Board for her internship for the 2021/2022 school year. As part of her internships, she is completing a research project for the Never2Late Initiative, which is funded by a grant from the Trellis Foundation. As part of the initiative, she will conduct interviews with members of the community who are underemployed/unemployed and are eligible to upskill and reskill for higher paying positions.

The main purpose of this research is to identify barriers individuals face that hinder them from entering into training programs and/or applying for higher skill/higher wage occupations that offer for family-sustaining wages. This data may also identify systemic issues that are impacting an individual's access to opportunities. We believe the data collected through this research will be informative and applicable beyond the scope of this initiative. Ms. Evans has permission from Workforce Solutions of West Central Texas Board (Board) and from the grant manager to conduct said interviews. The Board is accepting the IRB review and does not have a separate requirement for IRB review or approval.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:
Mary Ross
FCB9E6462E2D479
Mary Ross, Executive Director

DocuSigned by:
Bill Dean
AE751AC7B83F4FB...
Bill Dean
Never2Late Grant Manager

500 Chestnut, Suite 1200 • Abilene, Texas 79602 • workforcesystem.org
Phone: 325.795.4200 • Toll-Free: 1.800.457.5633 • Fax: 325.795.4300 • Relay Texas: 1.800.735.2989 (TTY) / 711 (Voice)
Equal Opportunity Employer/Services. Auxiliary aids and services are available, upon request, to individuals with disabilities.