'I Know I Can Do the Job, It's Just Putting It Down': Using Personas as a Mirror to Identify Strengths

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Abstract

Work is increasingly shifting away from traditional full-time jobs toward more fragmented ways of working, like gig work and part-time jobs. Yet, employment platforms like LinkedIn often privilege those with traditional credentials and work histories, presenting barriers to those who possess little experience translating informal experiences into a format that such tools expect. To address this gap, we propose a narrative-based approach that enables individuals to recognize transferable skills and practice articulating them verbally and in writing via a group discussion setting. Through a participatory design workshop held in a public housing community, we demonstrate how a cultural-probe and persona-inspired activity can elicit self-reflection, enabling individuals to communicate their strengths. While prior HCI research has highlighted the critical need for reflection in the job search process, little work has been done to facilitate this reflection and translation into employment profiles. Our work addresses this call and informs new design directions for employment technologies.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI**;

Keywords

Employment, Informal Learning, Non-traditional Pathways, Self-reflection, Personas

ACM Reference Format:
Julie Hui, Mila Ekaterina Filipof, Soyoung Lee, Shanley Corvite, Mustafa Naseem, and Tawanna R Dillahunt. 2026. 'I Know I Can Do the Job, It's Just Putting It Down': Using Personas as a Mirror to Identify Strengths. In *Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '26), April 13–17, 2026, Barcelona, Spain.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 44 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3790914

CHI '26, Barcelona, Spain

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2278-3/26/04
https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3790914

1 Introduction

The nature of work continues to evolve rapidly due to the acceleration of technological advancements [16], innovations like platform-based economies offering gig work [69], and the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. Such disruptions exacerbate inequalities among people with different skill sets (i.e., routine versus non-routine tasks), leading to job displacement and stagnated wages among middle-wage workers [6, 7, 16]. In addition, the combination of these economic challenges, coupled with rising educational costs [12] and widening economic disparities, has led to shifts toward non-linear career pathways [15], which involve a diversity of experiences and roles in different industries that may not appear directly connected or sequential. The fields of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW) have already begun to accommodate such shifts by exploring community-based digital training initiatives (e.g., [56, 57, 62, 65, 72, 77, 104] that provide alternative credentialing opportunities.

Despite increasing ways to build professional skills via non-traditional experiences, most employment platforms are designed to accommodate linear career pathways and formalized education, inadvertently excluding people who do not have traditional professional and educational experiences. Furthermore, prior HCI literature shows how resource-constrained job seekers often experience digital barriers to using employment platforms [54, 118] in part because platforms often assume high levels of digital skills and self-confidence [28, 31, 80] and access to professional networks [27, 55]. A central challenge of using these platforms effectively is being able to accurately capture and present individuals' strengths, either formal or non-traditional work experiences, to employers [68] in order to maximize their potential in an increasingly digitalized landscape. However, these platforms do not facilitate the pre-work of reflecting on what personal strengths to highlight and translating these strengths to an employment profile. To address these gaps, our work raises two key research questions:

(1) How do people engaged in a digital skills training program communicate "informal" work, job training, and education experiences to potential employers?

(2) What features might better support them in communicating "informal" work, job training, and education experiences to potential employers?

To address these questions, we conducted a design-based workshop, grounded in participatory methods and reflective design [41, 48]. Participants, all residents of a financially-constrained neighborhood, and many with limited formal work experience, learned how to provide digital support to members of their communities via a digital skills training program. During this training program, the instructional and research team noticed that participants struggled to recognize their new capabilities as "professional" or transferable. Our workshop took place approximately seven months after the conclusion of several community-based digital skills training sessions, with the goal of supporting participants in communicating their new expertise on hiring platforms.

To scaffold reflection and articulation of one's expertise, we developed an activity that involved group discussions guided by a persona-based workbook. This activity was deployed in a participatory design workshop, where participants shared opportunities and challenges in articulating their strengths for professional profiles. Inspired by cultural probes [41] and following guidance about persona and scenario-development from prior work [34, 35, 100], the narrative-based activity synthesized the lived experiences, aspirations, and strengths of those who participated in a digital skills training program. Specifically, the activity used the workbook to introduce an imaginary persona, Jordan Davis, whose narrative was informed by multi-year ethnographic research and data [76, 77] and bi-weekly input from our community partner. The workshop invited community participants to reflect on what the imaginary character should communicate to a potential employer as an impetus to re-frame and articulate their own strengths, values, and characteristics to convey to potential employers. Through this activity, we investigated how a persona and corresponding scenarios sparked group reflection on skill recognition and articulation of one's professional identity. Inspired by prior HCI work of low-fidelity scaffolds [54], we investigated whether this intervention could support translating these reflections to employment profiles, such as a LinkedIn-type page or job application.

We found that reflecting on the persona's experiences via peer discussion helped to recognize and affirm their own strengths that they developed through informal work, including caregiving and community-based labor. Our work reveals how community participants struggled to frame these experiences using conventional job-seeking language; however, the activity created a low-pressure environment and structure to help surface values and transferable skills. We extend prior research suggesting reflection [29], with some self-distancing, as supportive in developing job search materials. This work provides a tangible approach to facilitating reflection, as well as translation of these reflections, to employment profiles. Specifically, designing employment technologies to incorporate reflection tools, like a narrative-based activity, could be empowering for populations currently underserved by digital employment tools. Our work contributes:

- Empirical insights into how community members, engaged in a digital skills training program and living in resource-constrained contexts, articulate their strengths in formal employment settings, especially in the context of non-traditional employment or informal job experiences.
- A novel group-based reflection activity that leverages a relatable persona and narrative to guide individuals in conveying their strengths to prospective employers.
- Design implications for employment technologies that challenge traditional resumés and offer alternate forms of credentialing and representation of skills and strengths.

2 Related Work

2.1 Shifting Career Landscape and the Importance of an Online Presence

"Non-traditional" jobs have been the new-normal for several decades, influenced by factors including globalization and job outsourcing as well as changes in skill demand [17]. For instance, the percent of multiple jobholders in the US has steadily increased since 2020 [95], which relates to the growth of the gig economy over the years [46] as people find multiple sources of income. While various factors contribute to these changes, technology has greatly exacerbated such shifts, including digital platforms like ridesharing and delivery services and online marketplaces.

Digital platforms are not only accelerating changes in the broader labor market but are also responsible for the the state of job seeking and hiring practices as there has been a large emphasis on an online presence. Social media platforms, for instance, have contributed to the notion and importance of self-branding as it becomes a mechanism for evaluating job seekers and workers [42]. Scholars in HCI have studied personal branding on social media for job seeking and perceptions of the importance of an online presence for being competitive in a volatile job market [22, 92, 110]. These studies have been done with college students or young job seekers [36, 105, 110], but less is known about the self-presentation practices or expectations among marginalized communities.

The emphasis of online presence and self-presentation practices can disproportionately impact marginalized job seekers who may not have access to resources and opportunities to learn and apply online self-presentation practices (e.g., returning citizens [96]). Indeed, in the context of gigwork, a majority of gigworkers pursue this extra work for supplemental income and to cover gaps in their salaries, which demonstrates the importance of understanding how resource-constrained job seekers navigate contemporary job seeking practices that spotlight an online presence. Our work aims to expand this area of research by understanding how to better support potential job seekers in recognizing and articulating their strengths from informal work for job profiles.

2.2 General Barriers among Resource-Constrained Job Seekers

Despite online employment platforms offering extensive job listings, these platforms often fail to help job seekers in resource-constrained contexts create strong applications to find employment [118]. Job seekers with limited access to mentors, insider networks,

and prior exposure to professional norms often miss unwritten rules that privileged candidates take for granted [32, 58]. This gap manifests itself in multiple ways: lower-income job seekers tend to use fewer job search strategies and digital platforms, leading to fewer callbacks from hiring managers [31]. Consequently, existing inequities persist as employers favor candidates who intuitively display communication styles commonly associated with those of higher socio-economic backgrounds, often without recognizing these as classed traits [21]. For instance, prior work uncovered how a technology company's evaluators assessed applicants' "innovation potential" based on a style of articulating ideas and engaging in dialogue traditionally fostered in upper-middle-class environments [21]. This illustrates a hidden bias that disadvantages working-class applicants, who may not have access to the environments where such interaction styles are cultivated. These challenges underscore an opportunity for employment technologies and interventions to move beyond basic job matching and application assistance. What remains underexplored is an understanding of why articulating skills is challenging, as well as supportive environments where resource-constrained job seekers can practice recognizing and articulating their strengths on these platforms.

2.3 A Need to Support Skill Recognition and Self-Efficacy

Despite a growing reliance on online platforms for job searching, many job seekers face persistent barriers due to digital skills gaps and a lack of employment tools inclusive of resource-constrained contexts. Being able to describe one's strengths is a key part of writing job applications and finding employment. Yet, individuals find it challenging to describe their personal achievements due to discomfort or uncertainty regarding social norms, perceptions of self-promotional behavior, or a lack of objective perspective on their skills [51, 102]. Further, research shows that resource-constrained job seekers often lack confidence in performing digital tasks, such as crafting online resumés, navigating application portals, and leveraging social media for networking, compared to their higher-income counterparts [31]. Mainstream platforms are also ineffective in offering personalized feedback, career coaching, or effective pathways to skill development, which are crucial for supporting resource-constrained individuals [31, 33]. In addition, when resource-constrained job seekers use social media for employment, hiring biases and employer-driven surveillance practices can further marginalize these groups by favoring applicants with professional networks [80]. To address these gaps, interventions such as SkillsIdentifier and DreamGigs have been developed to assist job seekers in articulating their skills and identifying clear career paths [30, 32]. However, these tools are limited in scale and accessibility.

Within the field of psychology, theoretical frameworks such as self-efficacy theory emphasize the importance of an individual's beliefs in their capacity to perform the behaviors necessary for achieving specific performance outcomes [9, 10]. Higher self-efficacy levels correlate with increased confidence and capabilities [9, 10], which becomes increasingly salient in employment contexts [64, 71, 78]. In the context of the job search process, studies have found that enhanced self-efficacy can increase job search behaviors and subsequent offers [79, 85]. Self-efficacy can be compromised when explicitly discussing one's personal skills and strengths, a phenomenon linked to cultural norms around humility and modesty [81]. Prior work in this field also highlights how marginalized groups often underestimate their competencies due to internalized biases, discrimination, or negative feedback loops from broader societal structures [107, 108, 116].

Although prior work acknowledges that job seekers often struggle to identify and communicate their own skills, prior research has focused either on describing these difficulties (e.g. lack of digital access, limited resources) or on building one-off tools. Psychological research has demonstrated how self-efficacy, cultural norms, and internalized biases influence people's willingness to articulate their strengths; however, this work has rarely been connected to interventions for resource-constrained job seekers, leaving a critical gap. As a field, we lack interventions that address *why* articulation is difficult and *how* to create supportive environments for job seekers to practice recognizing and articulating skills [113]. Our work seeks to fill this gap.

2.4 Interventions that Support Reflection and Communication on Personal Strengths

Psychological research emphasizes the importance of self-reflection and the various mechanisms that facilitate it. Self-reflection is the ability to introspectively examine one's abilities and experiences, and this is imperative for personal development and effective self-presentation [9, 10]. Building on these psychological insights, HCI researchers have designed targeted interventions that help individuals overcome these barriers through structured reflection and communication activities. Cultural probes, for example, prompt open-ended reflection on everyday experiences [41]. Personas summarize user characteristics into archetypes that designers can discuss, critique, and adapt [2]. Co-created personas go further by involving participants as active partners in the development of these representations, allowing for more inclusive and empathetic design [89]. Vignettes, in turn, provide scenario-based probes for isolating key factors in a controlled yet realistic context, allowing participants to respond in ways that illuminate the dynamics of social or technological interactions [1, 5]. Such methods enable researchers to create spaces where participants' voices directly inform design outcomes and raise an open question of whether and how reflective formats might support community members in articulating and communicating their own strengths.

Recent participatory design approaches have further extended these ideas. For instance, speculative design workbooks grounded in Afrofuturism, have addressed gaps in traditional participatory methods by enabling communities to articulate and visualize their skills and futures in culturally affirming ways [13, 48, 50]. These more recent approaches address limitations of traditional participatory design, such as paying insufficient attention to power dynamics and representational bias, as outlined in [49, 61], and create space for marginalized voices to imagine alternative futures. How might we adapt such approaches for employment contexts?

These questions, alongside this body of work, motivate our study and approach, which we discuss in the Methodology. We built on this approach to not only elicit insights from resource-constrained job seekers but also to explore whether these insights could be used

to articulate challenges and build confidence in communicating professional strengths to employers. While prior work demonstrates the value of speculative and participatory methods, our study aims to contribute both a process and an exploration of why it may be effective for job seekers to recognize strengths in themselves through others.

3 Study Approach

3.1 Prior Work: Digital Skills Training and Interviews

We conducted our study through a collaboration with a nonprofit organization that primarily serves residents living in a public housing[1] community on Detroit's east side. Detroit faces significant socioeconomic challenges that directly impact employment opportunities for residents. The city has a poverty rate of 33.8% in 2022 [8], and the lack of technology access makes employment challenges harder. Approximately 43% of Detroit residents are without high-speed internet access [39], despite the city's efforts to distribute computer devices through digital equity initiatives, especially in areas like public housing [84]. Residents face barriers like limited access to devices, unreliable internet, and few opportunities to learn or practice digital skills, like the online professional communication skills essential for today's employment environment [98].

Effectively demonstrating one's capabilities, strengths and skills to employers and clients through digital job platforms is crucial in today's labor market. However, simply providing access to devices or offering digital skills learning programs is insufficient. Community members are also seeking opportunities to to effectively present themselves online. To fulfill this interest, we partnered with a nonprofit organization who led a community-based digital skills program using a train-the-trainer model, where experienced instructors coach less experienced peers to strengthen their digital capacity across the community. This informal training opportunity offered dual benefits. It supported participants by 1) learning new digital skills and 2) providing them with an opportunity to offer digital support services to other community members [76, 77]. To further enhance the effectiveness of this digital capacity-building effort, our research sought to explore how trainees might share the benefits of the program to potential employers. See Fig. 1 outlining the order of data collection activities and how they informed each other.

3.1.1 Semi-structured interview data. Building on our prior research evaluating this training program [76, 77], we revisited a set of interview transcripts collected with trainees who had completed the digital skills training sessions held between 2021 and 2024. This review allowed us to further explore how community members communicated the expertise they gained from the digital skills training program. Although not all workshop participants had been interviewed, the interview data came from community members in the same public housing community from which the workshop participants were recruited. As a result, some individuals participated in both the workshop and the interviews. These interviews were conducted shortly after the digital skills training sessions via Zoom and with participant consent. They ranged from 52 to 92 minutes and captured participants' backgrounds, their learning and training experiences, prior computer experience, how they interacted with their peers and instructors, and the perceived challenges they faced. This interview phase of the research was classified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the category of benign behavioral research with consenting adults.

[1]Public housing represents a federal housing assistance program that aims to offer affordable and safe rental accommodations to qualifying low-income families, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities.

3.2 Persona-based Activity

The concept of a "persona" is widely used in user experience research and design and is defined as "an archetypal character that represents a group of users who share common goals, attitudes, and behaviors when interacting with a product" [97]. Scenarios can accompany personas to further illustrate specific tasks or situations [100], helping people consider and explore different opportunities (or constraints) in varied circumstances. While the majority of persona and scenario use has been applied to settings such as design, healthcare, and marketing [91, 100] to understand user needs, personas and scenarios that reflect participant demographics and experiences have more recently been used in participatory design activities to encourage discussion and engagement [14, 52].

At the same time, personas are not without limitations and must be used thoughtfully. We acknowledge that the development and use of personas is controversial as personas can reinforce harmful stereotypes and fail to consider user-centered needs and perspectives [23, 24, 82, 112]. Scholars (e.g., [83, 112]) recommend multiple methods to counter stereotyping effects, including the consideration of multiple and intersecting identities, designing the material based on data from real end-users, and involving relevant stakeholders in the preparation of personas to reveal hidden assumptions.

3.2.1 Persona and Scenario Development. Our decision to use a persona and corresponding scenarios as a cultural probe was informed by 1) prior literature highlighting the value of personas in helping vulnerable groups feel more comfortable sharing and reflecting on personal experiences in participatory design activities [34, 35, 53] and 2) suggestions from the community partner to make the activity more approachable. We referred to prior HCI research that has used personas [34, 35] and scenarios [27] to help people discuss someone or something else, rather than themselves. Similar to prior work leveraging personas to elicit personal reflection in design workshops [53, 89], a profile of Jordan Davis (See Appendix B page 4) was created to represent a relatable character who also attended the same digital skills training program and who has similar demographics and background to those who would participate in the workshop. Illustrated profiles have been shown to foster approachability and engagement in participatory workshops [53], while describing both strengths and challenges provides more accurate representations of lived experiences [109]. We believed that presenting Jordan as a fellow program member would allow participants to not only feel connected to Jordan as a peer but also be more inclined to provide feedback and support, similar to how they would naturally engage with one another. Using a persona in this way leveraged psychological distancing [73, 74], which helps participants take a broader perspective on situations that might feel emotionally personal. As people are often hesitant to reflect on and

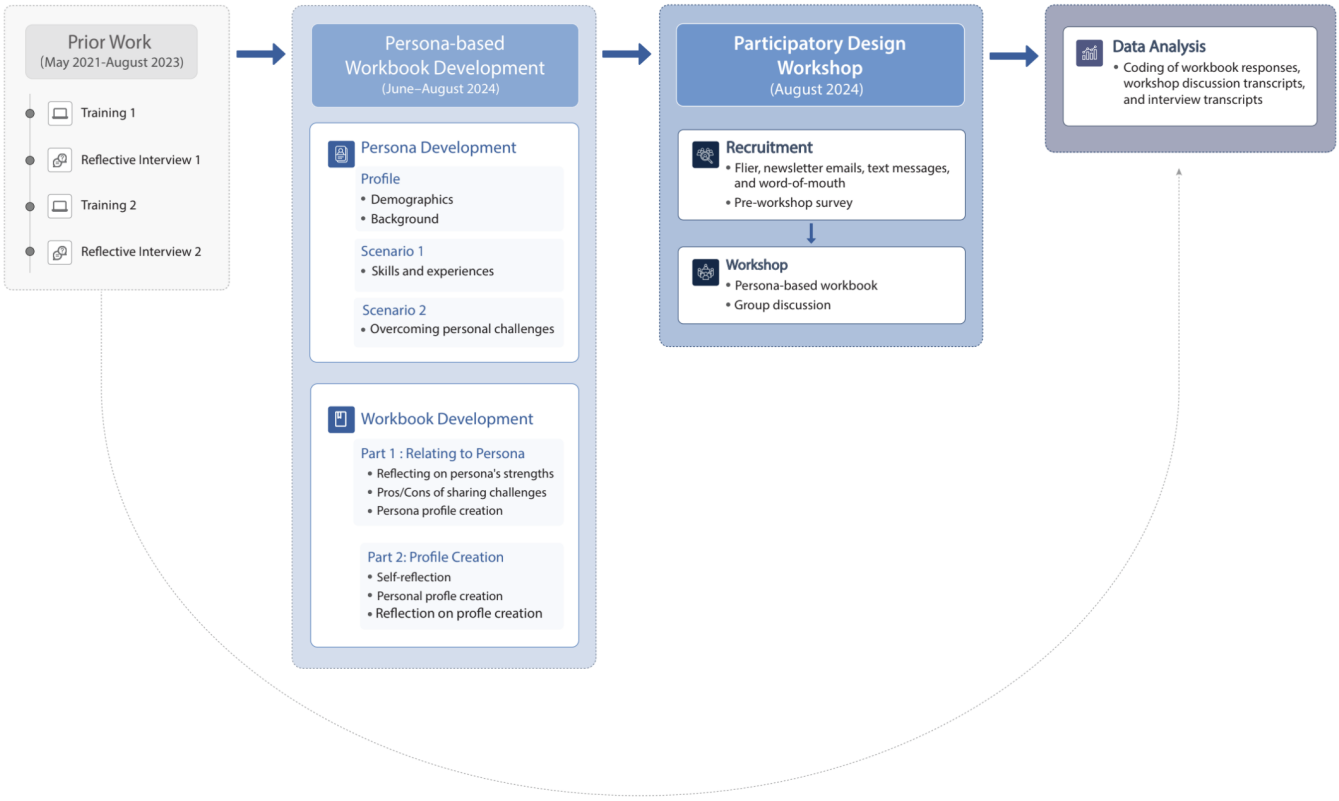


Figure 1: Order of data collection and how they informed each other.

highlight their personal strengths and challenges, especially for public employment profiles [19, 30], we hypothesized that seeing a similar person with relatable experiences would both model and encourage this behavior. Our hope was that participants would resonate with the persona as someone who they could relate to in creating their own job profiles.

The persona included three components:

(1) An illustrated **profile and description**,
(2) A **scenario describing strengths and skills** gained through digital skills training, and
(3) A **scenario describing challenges** they overcame to complete training.

To achieve our research goals while mitigating risks associated with personas, we developed Jordan's persona (See Appendix B page 4) by following ethical considerations outlined in related work [82, 83, 93, 100, 109]. This involved 1) referring to extensive ethnographic data [28, 76, 77] and 2) consulting with leaders of the community organization over three months. Basing the persona on accurate information with regular community input helps avoid the development of personas based on biases and assumptions. We reviewed interview transcripts, observation notes, and data analyses, which included extensive information on participant background that was used to inform the profile development (component 1), as well as participant strengths and how they overcame challenges, which informed the two scenarios (components 2 and 3). We mitigated privacy concerns by communicating salient patterns from prior work rather than reproducing specific experiences (e.g., caring for a younger sibling instead of referencing the actual family member mentioned in the data). Synthesizing and transforming participants' experiences into personas and scenarios has been used in prior work to reflect the intended user (e.g., [112]). We then iterated on the persona by presenting drafts to our community partner in bi-weekly meetings over the course of three months. While this approach is time-intensive, it follows ethical guidelines outlined in other research and offers a clear, repeatable approach for creating community-grounded personas that mitigate bias.

3.2.2 Workshop and Workbook Structure. Inspired by past HCI research that employed community-based participatory research approaches [34, 48], we implemented the persona-based activity in a participatory design workshop where participants have the opportunity to engage with each other as a group, sharing reflections on how they related to Jordan as well as ideas and concerns for themselves. Jordan's narrative was used as the guiding story in the participatory design workshop packet, which we call the persona-based workbook, that guided participants through the development of an online employment profile (See Appendix B for full workbook details). The persona-based workbook consisted of two main parts: (Part 1) Reviewing two scenarios to create an online employment profile for Jordan and (Part 2) Creating a job profile for themselves.

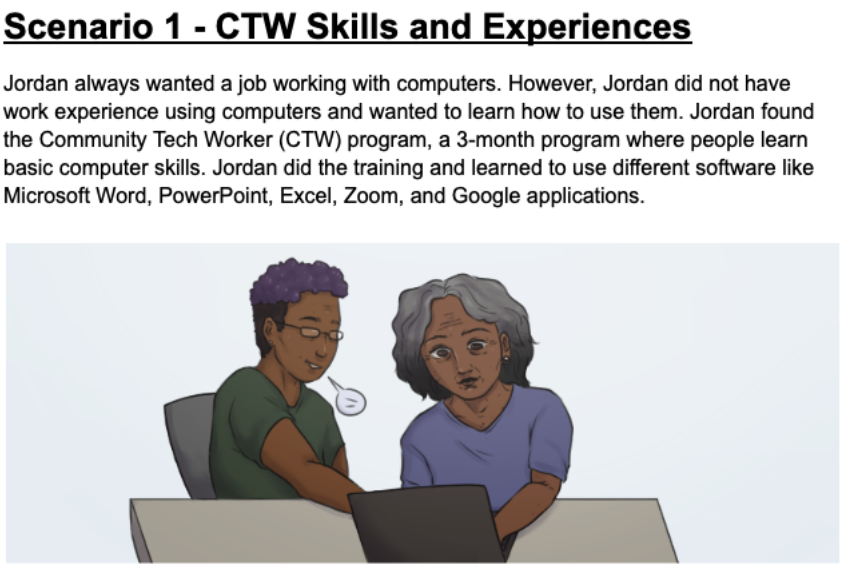


Figure 2: An excerpt from the first scenario describing how the character, Jordan, started the digital skills training program. These scenarios illustrated a longer narrative of how Jordan learned skills and overcame challenges to build their professional background.

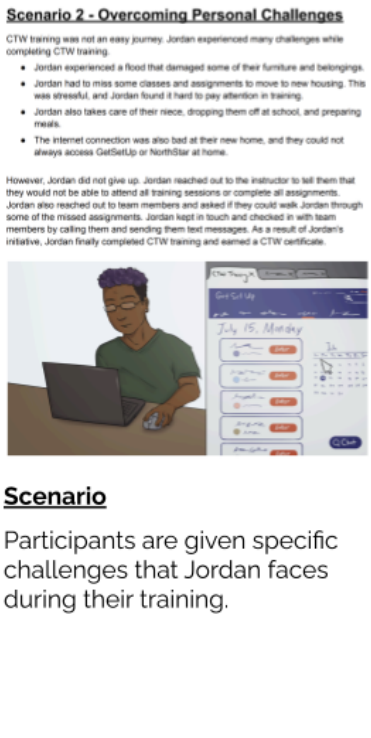
We hoped that participants would connect their experiences to Jordan's hypothetical scenarios by considering their own skills, abilities, and experiences to leverage future employment opportunities. This subsection describes the workbook in more detail, and we include the full workbook contents in Appendix B.

Part 1: Persona and Scenarios The goal of the activity was for participants to consider the potential skills and experiences they gained from their community-based digital skills training by discussing an imaginary trainee. In Part 1, we introduced Jordan, described as a 45-year-old resident with a high school diploma who previously worked as a backroom stock clerk at their local grocery store and was a caretaker for their younger sibling. Participants were instructed to assume any gender pronoun for Jordan with the assumption that they might better envision themselves with them, regardless of their own gender identities (See Figure 2).

The workbook begins with two hypothetical scenarios about Jordan. The first scenario describes Jordan's desire to work with computers, but their lack of appropriate work experience. The scenario describes how Jordan found and attended a local computer training program that provided training in software like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Zoom, and Google applications. After completing the training, Jordan could serve their community by organizing community events to teach others community skills, creating easy-to-read instructions to help community members with visual impairments, and assisting neighbors with everyday tech challenges, like forgotten login IDs and passwords. After reading about Jordan, each participant then broke into groups of three to answer a set of questions in the workbook, such as *"What are Jordan's strengths?"* and *"How do you relate to Jordan's experiences? Please give an example."* We asked the groups to identify possible job titles that Jordan could apply to given his strengths and skills. Following the group discussion, we asked participants to write out Jordan's qualifications in a professional online profile template in their workbooks.

In the second scenario, participants read about Jordan's personal challenges as a trainee in the digital skills training program. Such challenges were derived from those that community members shared in prior work. Participants read about Jordan experiencing challenges at home, including unstable internet connections and water damage to some of their furniture and belongings. These challenges led Jordan to miss classes and require additional time to care for their younger sibling. The scenario described how Jordan had difficulty keeping up in class and how they communicated with the training instructor on how they might catch up on missed classes. Jordan also communicated with other trainees who were able to help with missed assignments. With Jordan's initiative and peer support, Jordan completed the training successfully and earned a certificate. After reading this scenario, participants answered a series of follow-up questions individually and then as a group. Questions included describing the strengths that helped Jordan overcome unexpected challenges, how the strengths could be used in a work environment, and whether it was helpful for Jordan to share their challenges with their instructor. Based on this discussion, participants updated and completed Jordan's professional profile. They were guided to wrap up Part 1 by writing about how they would introduce and recommend Jordan to a potential employer.

Part 2: Creating Employment Profiles In the second part of the workshop, participants chose one of three hypothetical jobs to apply to, given the digital skills gained from participation in the digital skills training program. They then designed their own professional profile. Before creating their own profile, they discussed their thoughts as a group. They discussed what was challenging about creating Jordan's employment profile, what was easy, and how they might communicate their experiences and strengths in their own

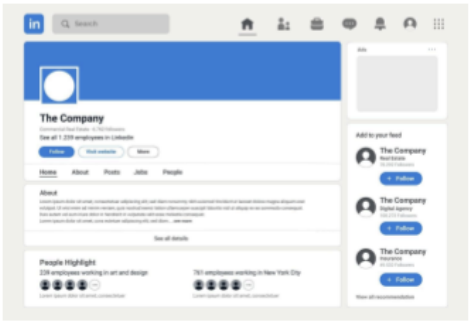


Scenario

Participants are given specific challenges that Jordan faces during their training.

Discussion and Analysis

Participants think about what strengths that Jordan demonstrated can be added to their profile, and how to recommend them to an employer.



Application and Design Activity

After creating a profile for Jordan, participants create a profile for themselves based on what they practiced.

Figure 3: Sample pages from the activity workbooks completed during the session. Image 1 shows a sample Scenario of Jordan overcoming personal challenges (the full text is difficult to read at this scale; See Appendix B, page 8 for the complete scenario). Image 2 on the right shows where participants could list Jordan's strengths to complete Jordan's profile and Image 3 exemplifies the subsequent application and design activity to scaffold creating their own profiles.

employment profile. Then the design activity asked participants to create their own paper-based online profile by considering licenses and certificates gained from on-site/remote training programs and skills and strengths they acquired through personal life challenges, as well as informal work experiences, work, and volunteer experiences in the community. Reflection questions in their workbooks about these experiences guided their design activity.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

With the support of our community partner, we held the workshop at the local community center. Two authors of this paper facilitated; two other authors, and one research assistant, observed the workshop sessions and took notes. The total workshop duration was three hours, including lunch and a 10-minute break. In addition to providing food, we provided community partners with $50 per attendee to pay them for their time. The IRB approved our participatory design workshop and persona-based workbook activities under the exemption category for limited benign behavioral interventions. Such interventions are brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, offensive, or embarrassing, and unlikely to pose a significant lasting adverse impact on subjects. Data collection methods are limited to verbal (oral) or written subject responses, and audiovisual recording is permissible.

3.3.1 Participant Recruitment. We recruited participants in the public housing community with our community partner. Recruitment and compensation were funded through a research grant. Community partners shared the recruitment flier via newsletter emails, text messages, and word-of-mouth, seeking community members who were: 1) current or former participants of the program designed to teach community members basic computer skills so that they would become community technical stewards; 2) interested in providing input on a possible certification of the program in the future.; and 3) able to attend a paid workshop session. The flier included a description of expectations and responsibilities of community participants during the workshop, such as sharing their experiences, insights, and expertise about their training program and simply learning and having fun. In addition to learning how to convey their strengths and skills through the training program on a resume or online, this workshop could also help meet community service requirements.

The recruitment flier contained a quick response (QR) code, linked to a survey to sign up for the workshop. The goal of the survey was to obtain participant consent and help determine the date and time of the session. The click-through consent form described the workshop, including the risks and benefits, the compensation amount for their time, who would have access to their research records, how researchers would protect their information, and how

the information collected would be shared. The consent form also included instructions on how to end the session. The survey link asked participants to indicate which days and times they were available, based on the day specified by our community partner. We held the workshop at a time that was convenient for most participants. The research team also asked whether community members could complete the session virtually if needed; however, all participants were able to attend in person. Additionally, the recruitment fliers/texts contained a participant background information survey, asking, upon consent, employment status, their current or most recent job or volunteer experience, job search platforms they have used, whether they have applied to jobs using the platform, and demographic information (including their birth year, gender identity, race and ethnicity, the highest level of education completed). The last four digits of their phone number were also collected, which were used as their participant ID in the workshop session.

3.3.2 Participant Demographics and Background. While ten people completed the recruitment survey, only nine attended the participatory design session. Based on survey responses, eight of ten survey respondents were women. The average age of the survey respondents was 52.2 (Min=22, Max=72). Seven of the survey respondents reported their race/ethnicity as Black or African American, while one respondent reported White. At least half of the respondents reported having some college degree, and two held a Bachelor's degree. In terms of employment, four were unemployed and looking for work, while three reported being employed full-time. Those who reported being unemployed held previous positions in retail and health. Those who were employed reported working full-time with Americorp, as volunteer coordinators with the non-profit partner, and as a digital support provider. Many of these participants were aiming for jobs in customer service and tech support. The remaining respondents were volunteers (n=1) or retired (n=1). Of those responding to the question, the most used social media site was Indeed (n=5) and social media broadly (n=4). Very few used LinkedIn (n=2) or Fiverr (n=1).

3.3.3 Workshop Data Collection. Throughout the participatory design workshop, data were collected from multiple sources. First, participant background information was collected through recruitment surveys from ten participants (as described in 4.1.3 Participant Recruitment). Second, participants' completed workbooks were collected, which included written responses to prompts/questions and profiles they designed. Third, audio recordings and transcripts of worship group discussions. The research team had four recorders, one for each group and one to collect the facilitators' voices. All recorders were transcribed via Otter.AI, a speech-to-text transcription application using artificial intelligence and machine learning. All four recorders were used in the same room with overlapping audio, so a professional transcriber was hired to create a single, comprehensive transcription for the workshop. Researchers who facilitated and observed filled the remaining gaps by amending the professional transcript to generate a full transcript. Lastly, participants' workshop feedback was collected at the end of the workshop from eight participants (one participant left the session about an hour early without returning their workbook, due to an emergency). Participants completed a workshop feedback survey on what they enjoyed about the session, what they learned, and what they would like to see in the future.

3.3.4 Data Analysis. Data analysis incorporated materials from both the workshop and prior research [76, 77]. Workshop data included observation notes, audio transcripts, written responses to the workbook, and demographic survey responses. The prior research data consisted of 13 interviews with participants in the digital skills training. The interview data allowed us to triangulate and deepen several emergent themes from our activity in this paper. Some interview quotes closely aligned with workshop findings, helping to strengthen and expand on key themes. The interview data also allowed us to contrast participants' verbal fluency with their struggles to articulate skills in writing, the format most valued in the early stages of the job-hunting process.

We analyzed all data through iterative deductive and inductive rounds of coding [99]. In the deductive phase, we developed codes informed by each section of the workshop (e.g., "Relating to Jordan's experiences," "Communicating challenges with employers," and "Creating one's own profile"). We then followed inductive coding to identify sub-codes to help us understand people's reactions to each section of the activity. For instance, from the section on "Relating to Jordan's Experiences," we identified sub-codes such as "Starting off training with less experience," "Troubleshooting technical issues," and "Exhibiting community knowledge." After developing an initial codebook by reviewing a portion of the data together, two of the three coders then coded portions of the workshop data and met weekly to calibrate, then independently coded the remaining materials. They then re-analyzed interview data from prior research (Section 3.1, [76, 77]) using relevant codes from the codebook developed from the workshop, such as skills learned, personal strengths, and overcoming challenges. The same two coders coded an initial subset of the interview transcripts together, and once they reached agreement, they independently coded the remaining interviews while continuing to calibrate weekly.

4 Findings

4.1 Articulating Strengths and Skills Revealed Through the Persona-based Activity

In response to our first research question, *How do people engaged in a digital skills training program communicate "informal" work, job training, and education experiences to potential employers?*, we found that participants struggled to articulate their skills and experiences. While participants reported difficulties translating informal experiences into professional language, they discovered their strengths through storytelling and reflecting on the teamwork experiences they gained through the digital training sessions.

4.1.1 Reframing Challenges as Strengths. First, a tension emerged among participants regarding uncertainty about the pros and cons of disclosing various personal challenges to employers (see Appendix C for details). For instance, when asked to list out the pros and cons in the workbook, P8 described that an "employer may feel positive about challenges that you were able to overcome. Could see you as a valuable employee," but at the same time run the risk of "sharing too much information." Here, P8 is contemplating the risks of disclosing personal information. On one hand, the challenges

they experienced could be seen as a strength. On the other hand, sharing too much detail about those challenges might backfire or be seen as making "excuses" (P5, workbook) as employers could view them as personal struggles that could affect their work negatively.

While participants filled out the above exercise on paper, side conversations emerged as individuals began voicing uncertainty as to how to approach these conversations about personal challenges. Through these exchanges, no clear conclusion was reached. Some championed their overcoming of personal challenges as evidence of resilience. P3, a member of the community, highlighted how these struggles are essential for employers to appreciate their perseverance:

> You're proving to the employer... that even though [you have] challenges...you're willing to hang in there… push through that. That might make the employer say okay. (P3, workshop discussion)

P9 expressed a similar sentiment in an interview, narrating his story of defying societal expectations placed upon him from childhood due to disabilities and stigmas surrounding his upbringing:

> It makes you stronger...with my handicap and other deterrences [ibid] that I had. I was branded at a young age as somebody who was not going to make it... Who determines you're not going to be able to do this? (P9, interview)

P3 and P9 capture a common aspiration for job-seekers—that an employer would view enduring adversity as an indicator of commitment and reliability. Participants viewed their adversity as a powerful demonstration of strength, yet they grapple with the fear that employers might misconstrue such experiences negatively. In the workshop, optimistic views were quickly countered by concerns:

> For your future employer to know what you've been through...I don't think they'd really care... They can also use it against you. You don't want them to think you're crying about things, or you'll be an employee with problems. (workshop discussion between P1, P3, and P5)

This tension highlights a critical uncertainty for resource-constrained job seekers. Some participants imagined a professional landscape where disclosing personal challenges allowed for connections to flourish and demonstrate resilience, while others were more pessimistic. The question then arises: How might employers enable resource-constrained job seekers to feel empowered when disclosing personal challenges? For example, participants mentioned that their comfort levels with sharing personal challenges varied depending on the context, alongside the nature and perceived empathy of their employer. During the workshop, P7 explained:

> I just said it depends on your comfortability. If you're comfortable with sharing your personal challenges to the employer, I think you should because they may have went through the same...or can show you how to resolve or share their personal experiences with that same thing. But I also said, if it's not asked, it shouldn't be elaborated on. (P7, workshop discussion)

Participants valued speaking with employers with a similar background because they felt that these people better understood their personal challenges. (P1 and P5, workbook; P7, workshop discussion) This highlights the importance of helping employers develop empathy for and recognize talent within the community. One participant discussed how they perceive others in their community not as "people in need" but rather as equals with unique strengths. P9 expressed:

> I don't look at them as someone in need because that's my—that's what I grew up in. We have similar issues. We have similar problems. We have similar upbringings. We have similar social stigmas. That happens when you're brought up in a certain area...you just know the people. (P9, interview)

The attributes that participants admire in employers, such as empathy, openness, and recognition of resilience, are qualities that participants also embody when navigating their own challenges.

4.1.2 Articulating on Paper versus Verbally. The digital training program equipped participants with the technical skills required to enter the professional landscape; however, participants already possessed the interpersonal and resilience-oriented skills that employers value. Nonetheless, a critical gap remains. While participants can easily identify and appreciate these traits in others, they often struggle to communicate their own strengths when speaking to employers:

> P4: I undersold myself. Undersold. I know I can do the job, that's not an issue. The issue is putting it down, you know, so I know once I get in that position, I can do it, but it's just putting it down there.
>
> Facilitator: What makes putting it down on paper so difficult?
>
> P6: I don't know.
>
> P9: Sometimes you don't know how[to] word it.
>
> P6: You know what you want to say. Now, but if you give me a list, right, of things right next to me, I can do it. But, if you just say, 'I need you to jot down this,' it's going to take me a while to do.

These exchanges highlight the importance of group dialogue, as interactions among participants allowed them to externalize their internal thoughts, explore the benefits and fall-backs of sharing personal challenges, and begin bridging the gap between their self-perception and the value they bring to their profession.

Articulating skills in written form was particularly challenging when considering the expectations of formal job applications. As described by P2,

> Choosing the right terminology to describe it… if I just say what I do, it seems simple... That's a skill set. They might not consider it a skill set, but it is. (P2, focus group)

Participants were confident in their ability to do the work, but many lacked the vocabulary or templates to express their experiences in ways that met formal job application expectations. Expressing skill sets within multiple job application frameworks, such as resumés, interviews, and online job profiles, emerged as another pain point. Several participants admitted that they were more comfortable doing a job than writing or speaking about it in structured settings.

Several participants described themselves as hands-on learners rather than writers, which they perceived as making it more difficult for them to describe their work in formal terms. As P6 described,

> I'm an action person. All this writing and thinking and all that, that's not my skills. (P6, workshop discussion)

Although participants described challenges articulating their skills on paper, when asked to describe their experiences verbally, they had a much easier time doing so. Participants shared detailed narratives about their expertise providing technical support to family and friends as they learned through the digital skills training program. For instance, P4 recalled supporting her aunt, who is in her seventies, on how to use YouTube. She demonstrated patience, technical instruction, empathy, and strong communication skills. Her story shows technical competence, emotional intelligence, and intergenerational awareness, which would translate well into professional roles.

> I was just sitting here on my phone talking to her and telling her what to do and she got frustrated....She says, 'Are you upset with me because I'm crying?' I said, no, I said 'I'm good, Auntie.' I say, 'Wipe your face because I need you to calm down because you can't see the screen if your eyes are wet.' And she started laughing, and we started over, and I was able to get her through that, and she got on YouTube...Not knowing I realized something about myself, I had the patience to do that...the same experience that I had of learning something new, getting frustrated, and not no one being patient enough to realize because of the dimness of their eyes or the cripplingness of their fingers, or...the hearing, or the mobility for them to do that. You have to be patient and understand that you may have to come back and re-teach what you taught to them early in the week or last week and have the patience enough to do that, and through doing that, that convinced me that, okay, I can do this [digital skills training program]. (P4, interview)

Participants were also able to verbally describe professional qualities like multitasking, adaptability, and teamwork, learned through other informal jobs and hobbies. For instance, P1 described applying the multitasking skills he learned from building cars to managing different tabs in an Internet browser:

> I don't think I would been able to multitask the way I do and keep up with all of these projects...I can do like on a car. I can do the body. I could do the motor. I could do the chassis part. I'll have all 3 pieces, and I'll be working on 3 different things at the same time....I understand that if you click another tab, [you can] do different things. (P9, interview)

Others described the value of learning how to work in a team, especially when working with digital technologies:

> Some things one of us knew, and the other one didn't, and another one explained it. (P6, interview)

Participants' verbal reflections highlight their strengths, ranging from interpersonal communication to solving problems together. At the same time, they described not having the formal vocabulary, confidence in writing, or feedback to represent their strengths on paper. Such gaps suggest the need for tools that scaffold reflection, storytelling, and verbal to written translation across informal and formal work experiences.

4.2 Reflecting on Strengths through Persona-based Activities

To address our second research question, What features might better support them in communicating "informal" work, job training, and education experiences to potential employers?, we reflected on how our persona-based activity supported community participants in highlighting their own strengths to create their employment profiles. We find that this activity allowed community participants to 1) see themselves in Jordan, the fictional character, and relate to Jordan's lived experiences. We also noted that there was 2) value in group discussion.

4.2.1 Relating to Jordan's lived experiences. Participants described finding it easier to reflect when using Jordan as a fictional proxy. They found Jordan relatable, as demonstrated by the workshop written responses when connecting Jordan's experiences to their own (Figure 4 and Appendix C). P5 described in the workbook, "It was like creating a profile for me because I have done most of the things he went through." P7 further explained:

> I related because most of the things that he was doing I've done myself....helping the seniors with remembering login IDs or how to get on Zoom or Excel or PowerPoint...I can relate because when doing his profile, I just thought about myself...I had a lot of his challenges...I really just looked at myself and seen a lot of things that he was good at that I was good at as well, that he went through that I ended up going through as well. So, it was...pretty easy for me to build his profile because he had a lot of the qualities that I think I have as well. (P7, workshop discussion)

P7 explained how the persona served as both a mirror and projection. The persona allowed P7 to internalize their own strengths while externalizing them by building Jordan's profile, which shared similar qualities. The persona also served as a way to connect to community participants' lived experiences and helped participants recognize Jordan's experiences as their own. Per P6's workbook, she explained how this activity helped build confidence in describing work-related qualities and served as a way for her to validate informal skills.

> I can relate [to Jordan] because when I was working and didn't have reliable transportation or a phone to call in and let them know what was going on. But, I

Participant	About Jordan	About You
P1	Jordan is a knowledgeable, well-informed individual. He is skilled in IT and community health work. Has exceptional people skills, is good at developing a rapport with anybody. He is a persistent, hard worker.	I am a hard-working multitasker who likes to be busy. I am a people person. I work well with seniors and children. I am staff support for any department.
P2	He is a dependable, reliable team player and leader. He has computer skill in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Zoom, and Google Applications. Jordan is an organizer and willing to help everyone.	Dependable. Excellent communication skills. Proficient in operating a standard desktop and Windows-based computer system like Microsoft Office. Able to multi-task: ability to function calmly and efficiently in a fast-paced environment.
P3	He has great leadership skills. Willing to go the extra mile for someone who needs help.	—
P4	He is a hard-working person. Dependable, open to new ideas. Willing to take the time to get it right.	I am able to think on my feet. Work well with others. Great communicator, and skilled at taking and giving direction.
P5	Jordan is a magnificent Community Tech Worker. He is very knowledgeable of computer basics, able to adapt to any work environment. His patience and computer skills would help others greatly in instructing them.	[P5] is a phenomenal candidate for this position. He is very patient, has wonderful communication skills, and is knowledgeable about all things tech-related and persistent in what's best for the company.
P6	Jordan is able to adapt to work environments. When there is a challenge, he's not afraid of it—he's persistent and patient and will get the job done no matter the obstacle. He can keep a positive attitude when completing his work.	Hi my name is [P6] and I have a lot of experience working different jobs. I like to believe I'm a fast learner. I'm more of a hands-on person and I work well with people. I can multitask and I work well under stress and in fast-paced environments.
P7	Jordan is a very knowledgeable, strong and motivated young man who loves his community. He loves to teach and learn technology. Jordan would be an excellent addition to any work environment if given the opportunity.	I am a very dependable, hardworking person who loves the customer service industry. I work well with others, and I am always willing to learn more and pitch in when needed. Knowledgeable with all Windows operating systems.
P8	Jordan is a person who has a strong work ethic, is always willing to lend a helping hand, has great communication skills, and is fluent in Excel, Microsoft applications, and remote access. Jordan is also a dedicated and dependable potential employee.	—
P9	Knowledgeable. Dependable. Caring. Able to overcome obstacles.	—

Figure 4: Participant reflections: About Jordan and About Themselves

> was still able to accomplish what I needed to help myself or fix the situation and show that I am determined to work. (P6, workbook)

In addition, P1 related to Jordan's lived experiences and identified Jordan's ability to manage family responsibilities as a meaningful skill. Participants recognized that navigating family dynamics and caregiving shows professional capability. Acknowledging and articulating such life skills emerged as a strength to highlight during the session.

4.2.2 Value of workshop. We conclude our findings by reflecting on the value of the workshop. To do so, we draw from community participants' written reflections on the session and our own observations as facilitators. Overall, the workshop provided a space for job seekers to identify their challenges in articulating their strengths, as well as a supportive environment for learning among peers and recognizing each other's strengths.

Written comments revealed what participants learned, loved, and hoped for in the future. Participants shared that they learned from others in general and received information from the class as a whole, noting that the activity was easier "with the help of the group" (P6, interview). They specifically noted that learning how to identify strengths in others is a technique for identifying their own strengths.

> I loved everyone's input in the discussions, connecting with one another and learning how to view things differently. (P8, workbook)

Their written comments demonstrate that Jordan's profile, which they loved, helped teach them how to effectively write about their skills and enhance their online profiles.

Participants' written comments reflected our observations in the workshop discussion and interviews as well. We noticed how participants struggled initially to articulate their strengths in writing, yet spoke with greater ease and confidence during group discussions. Again, this is why we returned to our past interviews. The workshop, in turn, served as an informal learning environment where participants began to see themselves in each other. As a

result, they saw themselves as having patience, strong communication skills, working well under pressure, being dependable, having the ability to multitask, working well with others, and more. They saw themselves as having knowledge of computers, troubleshooting, and teaching information. Several participants referred to the workshop itself as a class and the facilitators as instructors, which shows that they perceived the activity as educational. Their written comments and our observations suggest that the structured, collaborative activity, with the persona-based workbook, can support job seekers in skill articulation while also fostering learning and connections with their peers. In summary, we found that the workshop facilitated a space for participants to reflect on their challenges and consider strategies to overcome them.

5 Discussion

The nature of employment is increasingly shifting away from traditional full-time jobs toward more fragmented work, where individuals engage in multiple part-time and informal jobs. This transformation, which some call the "new collar" workforce [4], is driven by technological advancements, including the rise of the gig economy and changing societal values that prioritize flexibility and autonomy. Research in communications, media studies, and sociology points toward the increasing need to be self-branding [43, 70, 119] and entrepreneurial [90]. However, prior literature on employment, as well as current employment tools like LinkedIn, tends to cater to the white-collar workforce [31], often framing work in terms of traditional 9-to-5 jobs with clear start and end dates. The need for more inclusive ways of describing job experiences on digital platforms is increasingly necessary, where the type and ways of working, especially in technology [65, 67, 104], continue to expand. This study introduces an intervention to support the articulation of professional skills and strengths among resource-constrained individuals engaging in more flexible and fragmented ways of working, which employment platforms often fail to serve.

We build on prior HCI work on employment technologies and literature from psychology and workforce development to advance our current understanding of job preparation practices in resource-constrained contexts, where non-traditional and informal work are more common. We found that among financially constrained community members who attended digital skills training, the primary challenges of articulating employment skills involved reframing personal challenges as strengths and communicating these strengths "on paper." Despite acknowledging these difficulties, participants found the act of storytelling itself to be a more welcoming way of expressing their expertise (RQ1). Through a persona-based workshop activity, we found that engaging with a relatable persona in group discussion helped facilitate reflection and communicating personal strengths for job-seeking purposes (RQ2). Together, these findings highlight how resource-constrained individuals may be aware of their unique skillset, but are unsure how to best share them in professional profiles in a way that resonates with potential employers.

In the remaining subsections, we discuss our contributions in more detail: 1) a persona-based activity that encourages reflection on professional strengths, particularly for resource-constrained populations, 2) insight on how such interventions inform broader conversations on facilitating reflection in HCI, psychology, and workforce development, and 3) practical design implications for integrating lessons from this approach into future technologies.

5.1 Persona-based Activities as a Proxy for Reflecting on Strengths

HCI research has highlighted the ongoing challenge of helping people reflect and effectively communicate prior work experiences [19, 30]. We found that a completing a persona-based workbook in a group setting starts to provide the combined benefits needed to support resource-constrained individuals in articulating their informal work experience. These findings confirm related research highlighting the value of personas in helping, particularly marginalized, people feel more at ease in participatory design activities [53].

Yet, we were cognizant of limitations to personas as they have been extensively criticized for fostering stereotypes and are often created from objectified assumptions and biased data [23, 24, 112]. Unfortunately, to this day, researchers and practitioners in various industries, from healthcare [101] to design [91], regularly base decisions on ill-constructed personas created from incomplete and biased user information. Rather than using personas as a tool to understand "others," this study aimed to support participants in reflecting on their own experiences by relating to a character similar to themselves. Recently, researchers in HCI and co-design have started to use personas as a way to encourage participants to discuss difficult topics about themselves indirectly (e.g., health challenges [38, 109]). In these cases, where participants can relate to the persona, participants are able to spot an inaccurate persona right away, as they themselves are the experts. For our study, Jordan's persona helped participants to see their strengths reflected in someone who was similar to them and their community members, providing space for participants to reflect on potentially difficult situations in hiring or employment and how they might approach these situations themselves. Through group discussion, this approach helped people make sense of their own skills and employment norms.

Participants were also relatively confident in describing their skills and strengths verbally, as demonstrated in interviews and group discussions. However, we observed that participants still struggled to translate these strengths into written-down words for employment profiles. This gap is significant, given that most participants rely on platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed, which function as employment-oriented social media tools that require individuals to accurately represent their strengths through written profiles. While recent work questions whether such platforms are inclusive of resource-constrained populations with non-traditional work experience [66], these platforms still remain the norm for professional networking. Our findings highlight a critical design challenge—how to better support individuals in bridging the divide between verbal and written skills articulation. Future work could explore alternative ways of communicating professional expertise. Drawing on prior work and our own findings, such tools might scaffold storytelling or guide people in translating their verbal reflections into written or digital form.

5.2 Reflection as an Intervention in Employment (and Beyond)

People are often hesitant to reflect on and highlight their personal strengths, especially in public profiles [19, 30]. The use of the narrative may have helped participants feel comfortable speaking highly of Jordan and, subsequently, of themselves. We draw from prior theory and synthesize existing reflection-eliciting interventions to explain *why* a persona-based activity can elicit personal reflection. Literature on self-distancing in psychology explains that people often have difficulty reflecting from a "psychologically immersed" perspective and benefit from "taking a step back" to make sense of their past experiences [73, 74]. Similarly, theories of mirroring describe how seeing one's reflection, either through an image or a story, helps create the psychological distance to think about oneself in the third person. Thus, engaging with a similar other persona and corresponding narratives could have provided the space for participants to consider how someone else's strengths, skills, and challenges related to one's own.

Unlike prior HCI and design research, which has used personas [14, 52, 89] and vignettes [1, 5, 115] to primarily support empathizing with people different from themselves, our intervention aims to support self-reflection by connecting to a similar other fictional character. Jordan, who is described as someone who overcame similar challenges to those participating in the workshop, could be serving as a near-peer role model [87, 88]—a peer close to one's social, professional, and/or age, and whose success they could mirror in their own job profiles. In addition, prior work on reflection primarily focused on eliciting reflection without considering how to translate these reflections into public-facing communication. Related literature in psychology has explored non-digital interventions to support reflection in employment contexts via nudging [86], classroom assignments [75], and writing exercises [106]. Additional research on mirroring also finds that reflecting in group contexts may be even more effective because people can compare themselves to both hypothetical others [117] or peers in the group [45]. We combined reflection interventions in HCI, like personas and vignettes, with psychology-based interventions like group discussion and writing exercises to encourage reflection and its translation to professional profiles.

While prior work has highlighted various benefits to encourage reflection in the job-seeking process, few have also explored how to guide people in translating their reflections into employment profiles. Our work bridges this gap. The persona-based workshop combines research in HCI and design with workforce development literature by applying these insights toward community employment education. The persona-based activity may have been particularly effective given the peer discussion environment, which allowed people to talk through how they related to the persona [45]. We found that the persona's narrative provided a jumping-off point for people to bring up potential concerns and ideas, such as how to reframe personal challenges or articulate personal strengths effectively in job applications. These findings echo prior work in similar resource-constrained contexts, which highlight the value of in-person group-based formats for developing online professional profiles [54].

5.3 Implications for Job-Seeking Support Tools and Interventions

Our work complements and extends ideas for systems that scaffold reflection and writing of job applications. For instance, digital tools to support novices in writing cover letters, like Lettersmith [58, 59], and resumé feedback tools, like Review-Me and Interview4 [29], have started to explore how to guide job seekers in communicating their skills on paper. However, these tools do not facilitate the prework of reflection on what personal strengths to highlight. This study guides reflection into creating the tangible artifacts expected from traditional employment platforms and surfaces new design challenges for future systems. Specifically, how might technologies better support the journey from reflection to representation?

5.3.1 AI-informed Reflection. Researchers and practitioners could consider integrating persona-building features into job search or professional networking platforms to encourage reflection. This might look like helping job seekers translate their verbal reflections into the creation of profiles, identifying public profiles as role models, or even generating example personas. Prior HCI work has leveraged AI to support reflection through summarizing meetings in the workplace [18, 37], generating reports in healthcare settings [63], and creating reflection prompts in education settings [111]. Recently, HCI research has leveraged large language models to develop personas [11, 26, 44, 100, 103, 109, 120].

However, it is unclear whether such AI approaches to developing personas as a reflection tool would be welcome in this study's resource-constrained context where people may be hesitant to have their data used to inform persona generation. HCI researchers using AI to develop personas acknowledge the limitations of AI models, which are often trained on biased data [100] or do not have enough data on certain user groups to generate accurate personas [44]. These issues have been shown to perpetuate stereotyping, erasure, and exoticism in LLM-generated personas [114]. Therefore, critics and proponents of AI-generated personas emphasize the importance of using human-curated datasets and engaging human oversight throughout [25, 109].

Future work would need to go beyond exploring feasibility of using AI to scale interventions for reflection, like generating a persona-based workbook. Before building or introducing AI-integrated interventions in resource-constrained contexts, additional work must evaluate community sentiment about AI and provide education on AI risks, like privacy. If community members are even open to the idea, this would involve taking into consideration lessons on AI persona and scenario generation from prior work [25, 109], such as involving regular community review to reduce biases and measures to ensure that input data and resulting personas are properly anonymized. For instance, this could involve partnering with community organizations or representatives who would guide AI tools, reviewing AI output, and informing iterations. However, co-creating personas with community members ultimately provides community members with greater control over the process [40, 47, 89]. For these reasons, accurate and ethical persona generation may never be fully automated and would continue to be time-intensive.

5.3.2 Articulation Support Tools. The creation of the persona and corresponding workbook is only one part of the persona-based activity, as group discussions were also found to be critical for fostering reflection. We do not yet have evidence that this approach would work without group discussion, highlighting opportunities for future work to evaluate the activity's efficacy without group discussion and to identify ways for technology to facilitate group discussion synchronously or asynchronously. For instance, a future system could facilitate aspects of this activity online—from persona generation to online group discussions. However, prior research has highlighted that in-person groups are a valuable and effective medium for interventions in resource-constrained contexts, particularly where social capital is low [20, 54–56]. Prior HCI research has already started to compare differences between in-person and online group engagement in resource-constrained contexts [60]. Further research could explore what is gained or lost when we try to scale aspects of this intervention online.

Our findings also reveal a critical disconnect between participants' ability to articulate skills verbally versus in written form. While participants struggled to "put it down" on paper, they demonstrated remarkable fluency when verbally describing their experiences, sharing detailed narratives that showcased technical competence, emotional intelligence, and professional capabilities. This disconnect is particularly significant given the literacy landscape in the United States, as approximately 45 million adults read below a fifth-grade level [94] (roughly 21% of the adult population). These statistics underscore the urgent need for alternative approaches to traditional text-heavy employment platforms, especially for jobs that do not require a college degree or higher. Building on participants' demonstrated strengths in verbal communication, AI-powered systems could facilitate the articulation and synthesis of oral skills. Such systems would enable job seekers to verbally share specific instances where they demonstrated professional competencies – similar to how P4 eloquently described teaching her elderly aunt to use YouTube, showcasing patience, technical instruction, empathy, and intergenerational communication skills. Such systems could engage users in conversational interviews using reflection-driven prompting, synthesize key competencies from these narratives, and transform oral expressions into professionally-formatted content while maintaining the authenticity and richness of participants' stories. This approach directly addresses the challenge expressed by P6: *"I'm an action person. All this writing and thinking and all that, that's not my skills."* By allowing individuals to communicate in their preferred modality — speech rather than text — we can help bridge the gap between capability and documentation that currently disadvantages many qualified workers.

Despite AI's growing capabilities, our findings also acknowledge that AI alone may be insufficient. Participants in our study shared, both verbally and through their end-of-study surveys, the importance of in-person and social engagement when reflecting on and articulating job search and employment skills. Our findings echo prior HCI work that highlights the value of in-person low-tech scaffolds to facilitate use of higher-tech platforms in resource-constrained contexts where trust in and access to technology are limited [54]. While employment platforms like LinkedIn provide significant capabilities for searching and networking, they still often fail to support resource-constrained populations as effectively [31]. Furthermore, they are primarily designed to highlight traditional employment experiences rather than "informal" work that may not fall under a specific position or have a clear start and end date. Thus, our findings suggest adopting hybrid approaches that combine both peer (ideally in-person) engagement with the use of digital support tools, like AI, in job search programs.

6 Limitations and Future Work

This study introduces an opportunity to address the challenge of communicating professional strengths and skills for "informal" work, job training, and education experiences. We studied this challenge in the context of a digital skills training program in a public housing community. Although this is a niche area, the findings could inform ideas and implications for other related resource-constrained contexts.

Two limitations that limit the replicability of the intervention include the upfront work to develop the persona-based workbook and the group discussion format. First, developing the character and scenario involved significant prior research and an in-depth understanding of the community. We believe that this underscores the need for designers of employment support tools to engage with non-traditional workforce populations and develop partnerships with community organizations who understand their constituents in order to design platforms that work for them. While a scalable solution is ideal, our research uncovers many open questions that must be addressed along the way, such as, How/Could/Should technology, like AI, create personas that job seekers relate to? Could technology that creates these narratives preserve the privacy of the profile data it sources from? How could digital platforms connect and facilitate discussion between resource-constrained job seekers synchronously or asynchronously? For instance, researchers have already outlined why scalable online interventions are particularly challenging to implement with resource-constrained populations, given technology access and use, and have suggested the value of in-person group-based activities as an effective medium [20, 54]. Similarly, our findings highlight how relating to a persona through group discussion is helpful. The development of the activity is a first step toward understanding what kind of intervention could support resource-constrained job seekers with articulating their professional strengths. However, further work is needed to determine how this activity, or aspects of this activity, could be replicated to reach job seekers more widely. Ideas for future work include testing the efficacy of the workbooks when completed individually and exploring the possibility of using digital tools, like AI, to facilitate the development of relatable narratives for workbooks and facilitating group discussion.

Another concern is that an employment profile that mimics those on popular employment platforms, like LinkedIn or Indeed, may not be the best medium to communicate informal work experience. Future work could involve more open-ended participatory design research with both worker communities and employers to identify a new medium for communicating job skills. This study focused primarily on the experiences of individuals potentially applying for jobs and completing employment profiles. However, to determine whether these people are communicating their skills effectively, further work must be done with employers, hiring managers, and

recruiters to identify which communication styles resonate with them. Overall, the research opportunities for this space are vast. Additional ideas for related future work include developing interventions or platform designs that facilitate the communication of skills and strengths for non-traditional work, such as gig workers.

7 Conclusion

We present the development of a persona-based activity that guides individuals engaged in a digital skills training program in communicating their "informal" work, job training, and educational experiences. We found that being able to see and discuss a relatable persona with peers encouraged self-reflection on personal strengths that could be presented in an employment profile. While prior work has shown that reflecting on and articulating one's own professional strengths can be challenging, especially in non-traditional work and resource-constrained contexts, engaging with the persona may leverage mechanisms of psychological distancing and mirroring to help people recognize strengths in others as a way to realize and communicate strengths in themselves. Our observations of the workshop, as well as interviews with participants, uncovered how people were unsure how to reframe personal challenges as professional strengths and articulate their experiences "on paper" in employment profiles. Through a persona-based workbook activity and workshop, we found that engaging in a persona-based activity with group discussions helped participants reflect on their own strengths and skills, enabling them to communicate these on employment profiles.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) award SCC-2125012. We thank Samartha Okyne for her assistance with data collection during this project. Finally, we thank the NGO Friends of Parkside and the Villages of Parkside residents for their continued support and insights during this project.

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A Appendices

B Informal Credentialing Participatory Design Session Packet

Informal Credentialing

Participatory Design Session

University of Michigan School of Information
Friends of Parkside

Name: _____

Month/Year of CTW Training: _____

ID: _____

Overview

Introduction

Thank you for coming and participating in today's participatory design session! We are here to learn about how you would talk about your strengths and capabilities for future employment. The goal of this session is to discuss your training experiences, like the Community Tech Worker (CTW) program through a scenario of Jordan, who is an imaginary CTW trainee. You'll create Jordan's online profile and your own to express strengths and skills to a potential employer. **There are no wrong answers!**

Procedure:

1. We'll read about Jordan who completed CTW training and is looking for a job.
2. In small groups, you'll talk about Jordan's strengths and experiences.
3. *You* will help Jordan create a profile that Jordan can use when applying for jobs!
4. We'll have a group discussion on what it was like to create Jordan's profile.
5. We'll do a design activity where you can create a profile for yourself.

Ice Breaker Activities

1. Did you attend Community Tech Worker (CTW) training?
2. What did you learn at the CTW training?
3. What was your favorite part of the CTW training?
4. What is something you've achieved at work that you are most proud of?
5. What is your dream job and why?

Part 1. Scenario-Based Activities

Persona: Jordan Davis

- **Pronouns:** You may assume any gender pronoun (he/him; she/her; they/them) for Jordan in the scenarios below
- **Age**: 45
- **Race/ethnicity**: African-American
- **Neighborhood**: Detroit Eastside
- **Education:** High school diploma
- **Employment history:** Previously worked as a backroom stock clerk at their local grocery store
- **Other background information**: Caretaker for their younger sibling

Scenario 1 - CTW Skills and Experiences

Jordan always wanted a job working with computers. However, Jordan did not have work experience using computers and wanted to learn how to use them. Jordan found the Community Tech Worker (CTW) program, a 3-month program where people learn basic computer skills. Jordan did the training and learned to use different software like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Zoom, and Google applications.

After the CTW training, there are several ways Jordan served his community:

- Visited neighbors door-to-door and offered to help with any tech needs
- Organized community events to teach others basic computer skills
- Explained the tech lingo that some community members did not understand
- Assisted clients who forget information like their login IDs, email addresses, and passwords
- Created easy-to-read instructions to help clients with visual impairments
- Offered remote access support to accommodate safety concerns

Jordan was patient and wanted to serve the community and would go the extra mile to offer support.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Please take 2 minutes to answer the questions **on your own** below, then discuss them **as a group**.

1. How do you relate to Jordan's experiences? Please give an example.

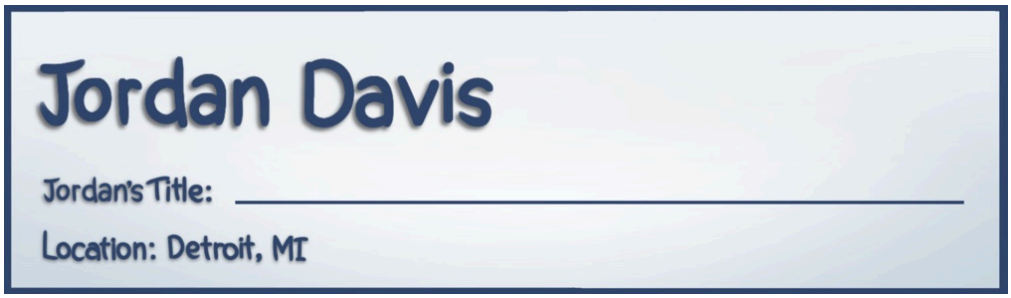
2. What are Jordan's strengths?

3. What are example job titles that you think Jordan could have or apply to?

Jordan's Professional Online Profile (Part 1)

Jordan is starting to build an online job-seeker profile. Please list the top four strengths Jordan could list. Please complete this **in pairs**.

Now that you learned about Jordan's CTW training experience and strengths, think of what title Jordan can give themselves.



Scenario 2 - Overcoming Personal Challenges

CTW training was not an easy journey. Jordan experienced many challenges while completing CTW training.

- Jordan experienced a flood that damaged some of their furniture and belongings.
- Jordan had to miss some classes and assignments to move to new housing. This was stressful, and Jordan found it hard to pay attention in training.
- Jordan also takes care of their niece, dropping them off at school, and preparing meals.
- The internet connection was also bad at their new home, and they could not always access GetSetUp or NorthStar at home.

However, Jordan did not give up. Jordan reached out to the instructor to tell them that they would not be able to attend all training sessions or complete all assignments. Jordan also reached out to team members and asked if they could walk Jordan through some of the missed assignments. Jordan kept in touch and checked in with team members by calling them and sending them text messages. As a result of Jordan's initiative, Jordan finally completed CTW training and earned a CTW certificate.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Please take 2 minutes to answer the questions **<u>on your own</u>** below, then discuss them **<u>as a group</u>**.

1. What are three strengths that helped Jordan overcome unexpected challenges?

2. How are these strengths useful in a work environment?

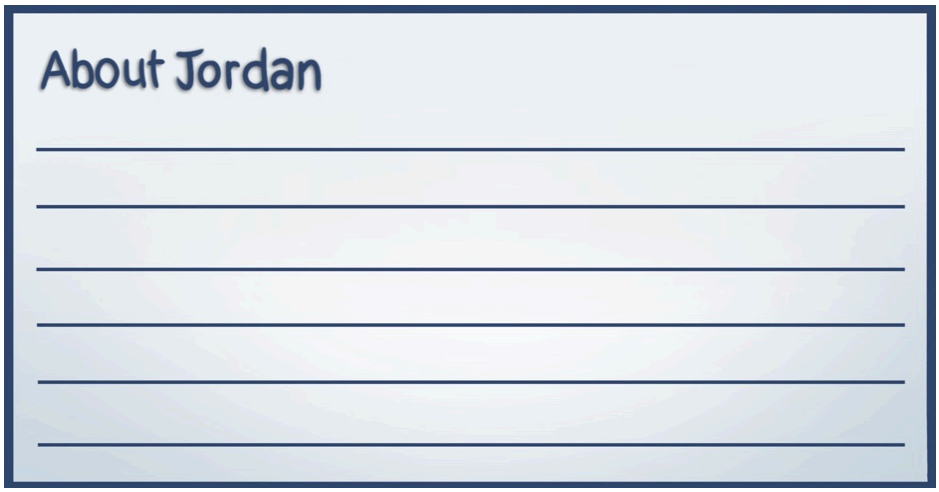
3. Do you think it was helpful for Jordan to share their challenges with the instructor? Why or why not?

4. What is important for a future *employer* to know about their personal challenges?

Jordan's Professional Online Profile (Part 2)

Jordan overcame many personal challenges during CTW training. Think about other strengths Jordan has that they can add to their profile. Please complete this **in pairs**.

Based on our discussion so far, how would you introduce and recommend Jordan to a potential employer?



Large Group Discussion Questions for Scenario Activities

Take 2 minutes to review the questions below **on your own** and write down any thoughts. Use these questions to help you reflect on the activities. This will help you create your own profile in the next activity. Then, **discuss as a group.**

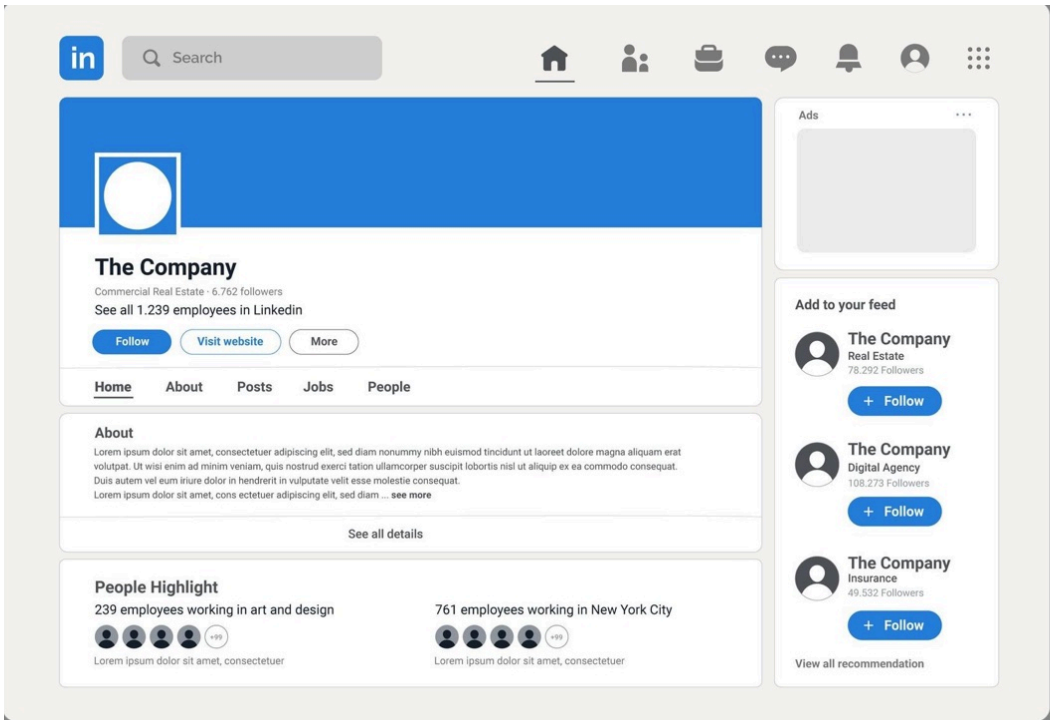
1.

What was **challenging** about creating Jordan's profile?	What was **easy** about creating Jordan's profile?

2. Now we would like to ask about *you*. How do you relate, if at all, to Jordan's experiences or strengths?

Part 2. Design Activities

Now that you created a profile for Jordan, you're ready to make your own! The goal is to create something like the image below, where you can display your experiences and strengths.



Circle a job that you're interested in. If neither of these jobs are interesting, please describe a job that you'd like to have on page 14.

Job Call Option 1 - Tech Support

Role: Desktop Support Technician at Best Buy
Location: Hybrid or Remote
Hours: 20-40 hrs/week

Description: As the Desktop Support Technician, you will provide onsite and remote technical support to Best Buy customers. This individual will be responsible for tracking all issues through our ticketing system. Listening to the employee's needs and resolving expressed concerns is the key to success in this position.

Preferred Qualifications:

- **Education**: High school education or GED equivalent
- **Skills and abilities:**
  - Familiarity with Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), Google Drive, Zoom
  - Excellent communication skills, including proper phone etiquette.
  - Able to work effectively with diverse populations.
  - Able to multi-task; Ability to function calmly and efficiently in a fast-paced environment and during emergency situations. Work is frequently performed under pressure.
  - Troubleshoot technical questions and provide support via phone, email, and in person (if hybrid).

Job Call Option 2 - Remote Customer Care

Role: Customer care representative at Trinity Health, a non-profit healthcare system
Location: Remote
Hours: 20-40 hrs/week

Description: As a Customer Care Representative, you will connect callers to providers and services throughout southeast Michigan hospitals and care centers. Callers might ask to set up doctor appointments, request to be connected to the insurance office, and ask to be connected to a healthcare professional or address complaints.

Preferred Qualifications:

- **Education**: High school education or GED equivalent
- **Skills and abilities:**
  - Proficient in operating a standard desktop and Windows-based computer system like Microsoft Office
  - Excellent communication skills, including proper phone etiquette.
  - Able to work effectively with various levels of organizational members and diverse populations including staff, leadership, physicians, patients, and family members.
  - Able to multi-task; Ability to function calmly and efficiently in a fast-paced environment and during emergency situations. Work is frequently performed under pressure.

Job Call Option 3 (open-ended) - _____

Please fill in the blanks or circle an option.

Role: _____

Location: In-person OR Remote OR Hybrid

Hours: 10-20 hrs/week OR 20-40 hrs/week

Description: _____

_____

_____

Preferred Qualifications:

- **Education**: _____
- **Skills and abilities:**
  - _____
  - _____
  - _____
  - _____
  - _____

Reflection Questions

In the next five minutes, review the questions below **on your own** and write down any thoughts. Then, we'll briefly **discuss as a group**.

1. What are some examples of you helping your community with their tech needs?

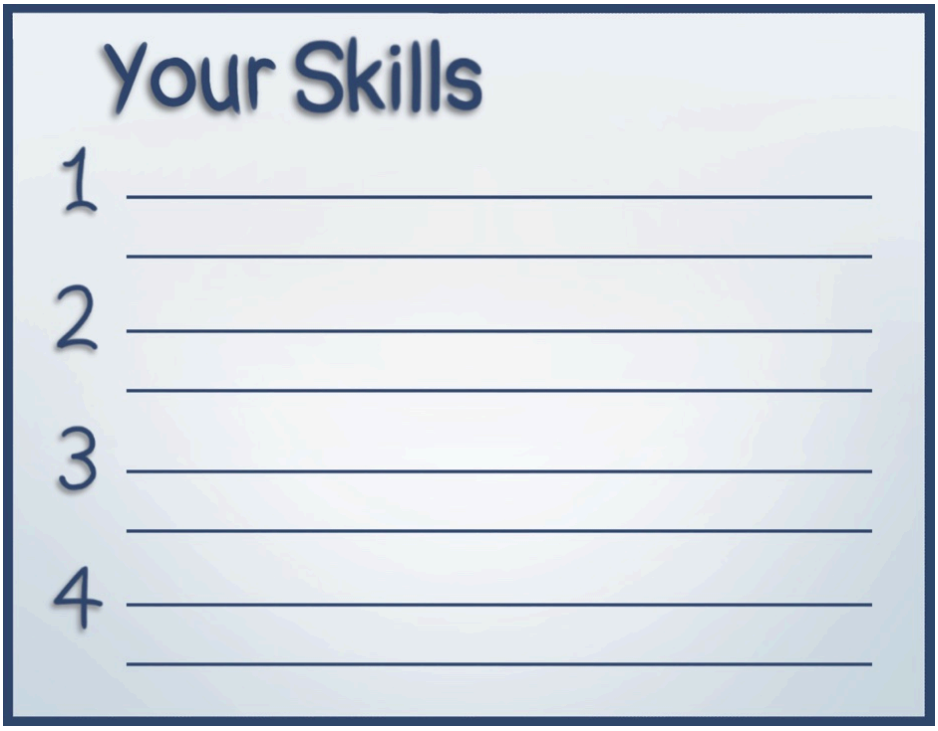
2. How did you overcome challenges helping your community with their tech needs?

3. What are the pros/cons of sharing your personal challenges with instructors or employers?

4. What characteristics, strengths, expertise or skills we discussed before can be useful to perform the job you chose on page 14-16?

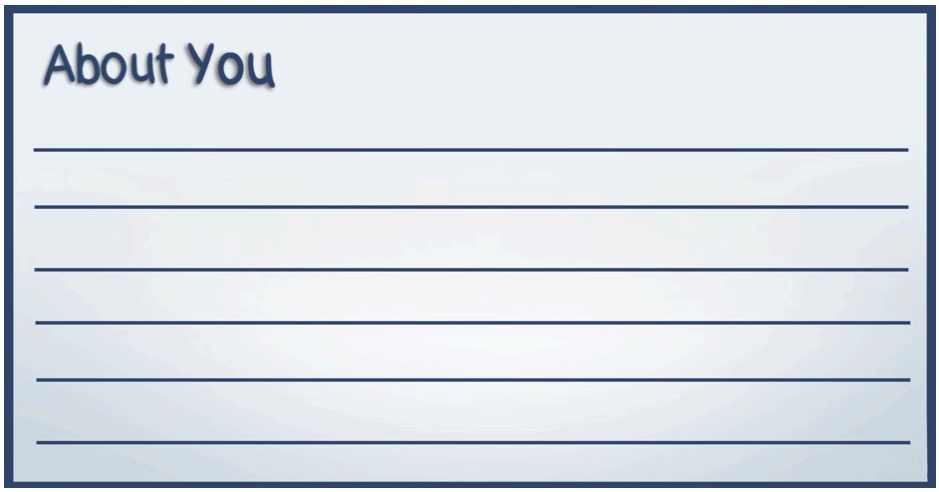
Participant Profile

Fill in the boxes below as if you were applying for the job you selected above.


Your Skills
1
2
3
4


Your Work/Volunteer Experiences
1
2
3
4

Based on our discussion so far, how would you introduce yourself to a potential employer?



Large Group Discussion Questions for Profile Design Activity

1. Which job were you responding to? Please circle.

Job Call 1 OR **Job Call 2** OR **Job Call 3**

2.

What was **challenging** about creating your profile?	What was **easy** about creating your profile?

3. Describe the process you used to select the content for your profile. How did you decide which experiences, certificates, and/or skills to include?

4. Were there things you considered adding but chose not to? If so, what were they and why did you decide against including them?

5. What part of your profile do you think employers would be most excited about?

6. Was it easier to create Jordan's profile or your own? Why?

7. What guidance was helpful when creating the profile for Jordan? What resources might help overcome any challenges in creating a profile?

8. If you could create another box or space on your online profile, what would it be?

Name: _____

ID: _____

C Design packet data

Participant	Pros	Cons
P1	They may have had some of the same challenges and can relate to your experience.	They may see your challenges as hindering things that might affect how you do your work. They may have negative opinions.
P2	Hoping they support me through my challenges.	Communicating my challenges.
P3	Opening myself up to them, showing what they may feel is a weakness. Sharing that [I] can persevere through what may come.	—
P4	Work with the instructors with the personal challenges.	—
P5	Learning that the instructor may have gone through the same thing.	Explaining your challenges without making excuses.
P6	People understand things because it could be a problem for you but not to them / or see it how you see it.	—
P7	That it can either help or hinder.	—
P8	Employer may feel positive about challenges that you were able to overcome. Could see you as a valuable employee.	Sharing too much information.
P9	(incomplete - participant left early)	(incomplete - participant left early)

Figure 5: Participant perspectives on sharing personal challenges with employers

Participant	What was easy about creating Jordan's profile?	What was easy about creating your own profile?	What was challenging about creating Jordan's profile?	What was challenging about creating your profile?
P1	He has so many employable skills. Seems to have a great personality.	Listing my education and certificates, sharing what I do.	Figuring out how to describe his many skills.	Describing what my skills are and how they apply to my choice.
P2	His ability to learn and help others.	Current experiences / training.	—	Trying to remember past experiences.
P3	Knowing he is a well-rounded, evenly person.	—	Trying to find something which strength.	—
P4	—	Some what not to oversell yourself.	Knowing what to say and how to say it	—
P5	It was like creating a profile for me because I have done most of the things he went through to become a CTW.	I know all of my skills and things I should work on.	Accessing his strengths and how they coincide with the CTW class.	—
P6	Being able to write down everything like his strengths and being able to understand his strengths and things that he went through to accomplish what he needed to.	When I figured out what to write, everything just came to mind.	Describing his skills. There were a couple things that were hard to describe on paper & how to word it.	Thinking of things to write down about myself that are relatable to the subject.
P7	—	—	—	—
P8	Knowing what Jordan has overcome, knowing how persistent he was with completing his course, also knowing how knowledgeable he was with computers.	Getting the wording correct (strengths).	—	I know what my strengths are, but just wording it is a little difficult for me. It would take a little time to get my thoughts together.
P9	Everything	—	—	—

Figure 6: Participant reflections on creating Jordan's and their own profiles