

AUTISM SPECTRUM NEWS

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INFORMATION, ADVOCACY, AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

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Autism and Employment

Conducting a Job Search: Quick Tips to Guide Your Journey

By Michael Giorgio
Spectrum Works, Inc.

Let us begin with facts: job searching is not always easy - for anyone. Most people, whether they are autistic or not, will experience several potential hurdles when finding the right job for them. Although there are additional challenges that are unique to autistic individuals, the initial steps of the journey are similar, and these core elements of any job search campaign can make a difference in a competitive job market.

[Spectrum Works](#) is a non-profit dedicated to providing job training and life success skills for autistic young adults. While much of the curriculum and practical training are specific to autism, portions of our career planning are applicable to anyone and are key to identifying who you are and what you can bring to the professional world.

Job searching is a complex process and no one article will offer an all-encompassing solution. Most autistic individuals will need the support and guidance of professionals over time to become seasoned in all aspects of career planning. In the meantime, here are some quick tips you can



take away today to get started and that can hopefully help you gain an edge in your personal marketing campaign.

Who Am I? What Do I Want?

Our ultimate goal is to find meaningful

employment - a job that inspires and fits “me.” Much has been written lately about “special interests” related to autism. Beyond challenges - which are individual to each person - there also exists your own unique attributes or strengths. Identifying and promoting these strengths to align with

the myriad job requirements out there (that most of us never realized existed) can bring you to the top of the resume pile. That is the first step. That is where you need to be. The process of interviewing and winning the job is phase two of the process, which many other resources will cover further in depth.

A recent article in [Spectrum](#) illustrates how one of the hallmarks of autism, an intense and often narrow focus on a very specific topic, can lead to a career. In response to autistic blogger [Pete Wharmby's 2020 Twitter post](#) - “Anyone #autistic managed to make a living from a special interest?” - people with professions as diverse as librarian, tattoo artist, train conductor, and even paleontologist responded that their passions inspired and informed their life's work.

[Temple Grandin, PhD](#), whose passion for animals led to her becoming a preeminent expert and thought leader on animal behavior, and [John Elder Robison](#), an auto enthusiast and highly recognized restorer of classic cars, are two prominent autism advocates who have turned their special interests into a profession.

Try this (fun) exercise: make a list of everything you enjoy doing. It can be anything

see Job Search on page 25

Neurodiversity Hiring Programs - A Path to Employment?

By Marcia Scheiner
President
Integrate Autism Employment Advisors

Standard recruiting and interviewing processes are designed for the ways neurotypical candidates think. Unfortunately, these practices often obscure the talents neurodivergent candidates can bring to an organization. While some autistic individuals do obtain employment through an employer's standard recruiting process without disclosing they have a neurodivergent profile or requesting an accommodation, the unemployment statistics suggest that those individuals are in the minority. To address this, some employers are modifying their recruiting and interviewing practices to provide autistic candidates the opportunity to demonstrate their skill sets in ways that suit their presentation styles, while others have gone as far as setting up completely distinct programs for hiring autistic employees.

The History of
Neurodiversity Hiring Programs

Present day neurodiversity hiring programs have evolved from a combination of

History of Disability and Neurodiversity Hiring Initiatives



federal and corporate initiatives (see History Timeline, above).

The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1920, which provided funds for people with physical disabilities, laid the groundwork for the current vocational service system for people with disabilities in the U.S. Over the years, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act was expanded to include services for persons with other types of disabilities. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed to include persons with severe disabilities and incorporate civil rights protection for persons with disabilities (Idaho Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, n.d.). In 2014, the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) updated the laws governing vocational services. Unlike prior

legislation, WIOA was meant to ensure disabled workers are provided with the skills to succeed in a competitive employment environment and engage employers in a more meaningful way in the process of creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

On the corporate side, in 2008 Walgreen's started hiring a significant number of employees with disabilities to work in two major distribution centers, and in 2010 started the Retail Employee Disability Initiative to train people with disabilities in their retail pharmacies. In March 2013, SAP announced its intention to have 1% of its workforce be comprised of autistic employees by 2020. For a Fortune 500 company, this was an incredible commitment at that time.

With SAP's announcement, hopes rose that doors would begin opening at large employers interested in including autistic jobseekers in their ranks. SAP was followed by several other global employers in making significant commitments to implementing autism hiring programs - DXC Technology (2014), JPMorgan Chase and Microsoft (2015) and EY (2016). Today, these five employers have the largest neurodiversity hiring efforts, measured by number of employees hired, among multi-national corporations. Additionally, at least fifty other major corporations, worldwide, have launched hiring initiatives targeting neurodivergent talent.

Hiring Approaches

The approaches employers take to include autistic individuals can range from hiring initiatives developed solely for neurodivergent candidates to creating inclusive processes within the company's existing hiring practices.

Distinct Hiring Processes - Some companies choose to establish an autism hiring program that is distinct and separate from

see Hiring on page 34



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“Challenging Behaviors and Autism”

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Winter 2022 Issue

“Improving Lives with Technology”

Deadline: December 3, 2021

Spring 2022 Issue

“Education and Autism”

Deadline: March 3, 2022

Summer 2022 Issue

“Understanding and Treating Co-Occurring Conditions”

Deadline: June 7, 2022

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Center for Career Freedom	MOVIA Robotics	Westchester Jewish Community Services (WJCS)
		Winters Center for Autism

Ensuring Safety in an Inclusive Workplace

By Heather Purcell
Risk Management Specialist
Irwin Siegel Agency

According to the [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#), “Americans on the autism spectrum experience substantial challenges to attaining competitive integrated employment opportunities that match their interests, gifts, and talents. They experience substantial unemployment and underemployment, according to the research literature.” Establishing an inclusive and supportive workplace for individuals on the autism spectrum relies upon employers willing to commit to the safety and understanding of all employees. Using equity as the lens, rather than equality, ensures appropriate modifications will promote an inclusive and successful workplace relationship.

Many years ago, I worked as a case manager for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As with any person, each had their own unique talents requiring cultivation to get to the truest potential. One young man was exceptionally eager to work. While friendly and helpful, there were some concerns about successfully following two to three step instructions. An employment coach was confident that a job at a local auto repair shop would be a great fit based on personality. The job du-



Heather Purcell

ties were largely maintenance-based and well within the person’s skill range. As time went on, supervision became lax, leading to immediate red flags. By the time the information made its way back to me, numerous reports stated circumstances where he was found under vehicles with tools, operating machinery, and involved in duties outside of the role they had been employed to carry out. The employer determined the risk was too high to continue employment. Termination devastated this person, leading to neg-

ative self-talk as well as heightened anxiety around any new job prospects.

In this brief scenario there are clear missed opportunities preceding the outcome. They fall heavily upon the support team’s mismanagement. Employers looking to create an inclusive setting for employees with Autism should consider multiple avenues to determine what works best for their business. Some individuals with Autism will not need significant workplace supports. Some may need or be receiving external supports from a provider. Some may benefit from accommodations within the current employee structure. These are all worth considering when exploring the hiring process in order to identify the candidate’s needs. This process is not very different from any other hiring process, looking at skillset and determining potential as an employee.

Each state has varying degrees of available employment services. These services provide a scope of support from skill development to on-the-job mentorship. Employers can become leaders in inclusive employment by considering the state based supports available to potential employees. Establishing a partnership with employment support organizations can create a secure foundation where the employee will thrive and meet job expectations. These job expectations should be clearly defined and outlined. Consider the above situation. To circumvent an employee’s drive to go

above and beyond, also include a list of non-responsibilities. For example, it was not his responsibility to operate machinery, move parts around, or perform duties without being asked by the supervisor. Setting boundaries in an employee’s responsibilities will ensure they have established parameters in their role.

Equally important is ensuring the position fits the employee’s unique range of abilities. If we consider the analogy of fitting a square peg in a round hole, it applies in this situation. The logical choice is to fit each peg into the appropriate hole. This may mean assessing the position and making reasonable accommodations so the employee can be successful. Expecting the employee to adapt to expectations outside of their skill level is not best practice. Consider the sensory demands of the position in order to ensure they will not be overwhelming, distracting, or barriers to a successful employee/employer partnership.

Mentorship is extremely valuable when establishing an inclusive work environment. Challenges with interpersonal skills and fitting in may be a barrier to an employee with Autism. Placing a fellow employee within supporting distance is one way to ensure work tasks are holistically managed and encouraged. This also promotes skill-based learning through mirroring. Mirroring is when a person with a

see Safety on [page 23](#)

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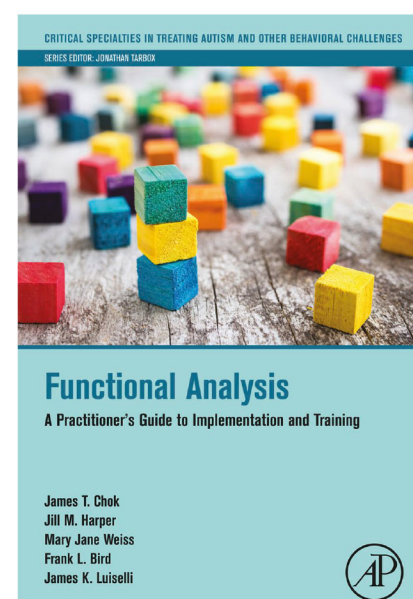
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Fostering a Healthy Workplace Requires a Holistic Approach

By Louis Chesney
Manager of Neurodiversity
Rethink Benefits

Our home lives have invaded our workspaces, and vice-versa. The whole person, not just the employee, shows up at work, and likewise, it's not just mom or dad who shows up at home. Because of the pandemic's significant impact on employee work-life balance, employers can no longer assume employees have mental fortitude. According to a 2021 CDC survey, more than two in five adults (42%) reported symptoms of either anxiety or depression during the pandemic (Vahratian et al., 2021). Autistic individuals experience higher rates of anxiety or depression (Oomen et al., 2021). Due to these significant life pressures, employees may not successfully deal with work pressures and other matters. Because of this, employers play an essential role: Achieve an environment that is truly safe, nurturing, and supportive for everyone's mental well-being beyond creating flexible work schedules and check-ins. Employers can foster a mentally healthy workplace by:

- 1. **Furthering** psychological safety
- 2. **Acknowledging** strengths and autonomy
- 3. **Integrating** wellness into business practices



Louis Chesney

Furthering Psychological Safety

Many employers are hiring autistic individuals and creating a psychologically safe environment for them. In his article, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work," William Kahn, who coined the term "employee engagement" in the 1990s, defines psychological safety as showing and employing one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or ca-

reer (1990). Like psychological safety, the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to enable autistic individuals to express themselves without the risk of encountering adverse reactions from their colleagues and managers. The paradigm also sees all neurocognitive functioning as a natural part of the human variation that is to be expected and accepted as part of diversity (Honeybourne, 2019).

Further research shows that building psychological safety happens interac-

tion-by-interaction, moment-by-moment, one-on-one, and with the entire team (Rothwell et al., 2015). According to the book *Healthy Workplace Nudge*, which further updated the idea of psychological safety in 2018, interacting with others with this paradigm in mind can lead to information sharing and improved coordination - coordination that becomes cooperation, and the willingness to share resources and collaborate around common goals. Social-emotional learning is a primary tool in promoting psychological safety. Employees of all social backgrounds and cognitive makeup experience mental well-being when they feel included, engaged, and empowered to contribute to the organization and think their views and expertise are heard and acted upon.

Acknowledging Strengths and Autonomy

According to a 2019 study in the *Journal of Happiness*, when employees perceive that their organization supports them and their strengths, they feel more satisfied with life and experience less burnout. The study findings also provide convincing evidence for the benefit of focusing on an individual's strengths at work (Meyers et al.). Still, organizations must establish clear roles and responsibilities at the intersection of individual abilities and organizational

see *Holistic* on page 24

This is what success looks like...



This is what an adult living with autism looks like!

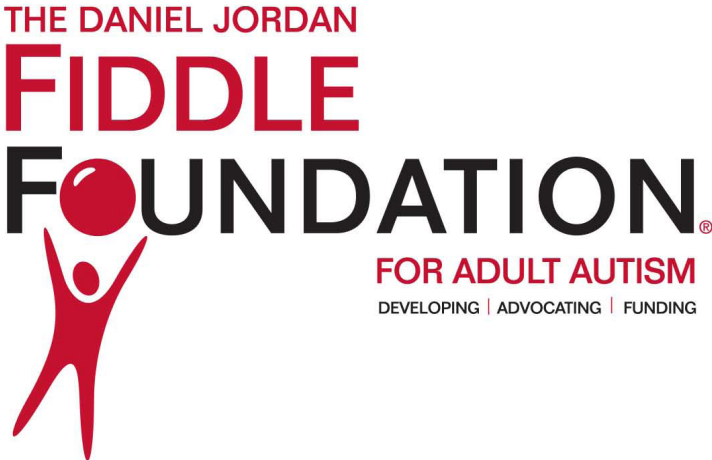
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Set Up For Success: Vista Life Innovations' Three-Step Employment Model

By Becky Lipnick
Communications Lead
Vista Life Innovations

Employment can be a source of anxiety for both individuals with disabilities and their families. The rate of unemployment or underemployment for those with autism in the U.S. is particularly high compared to those with other disabilities or the general population (Ohl et al., 2017). Despite the obstacles, organizations like [Vista Life Innovations](#), a nonprofit along the Connecticut shoreline dedicated to assisting individuals with disabilities, have seen those with disabilities like autism find and succeed with paid employment, often staying with the same company for decades if they choose. Vista believes that everyone can be employed in some way and that everyone can reach their full potential. Their strategy for employment success has three steps: build a general foundation of independence, cultivate vocational readiness through job development and training sites, and prepare students to showcase their abilities during the hiring process.

The first step to becoming ready for employment is building up general independence skills. After all, the traits that make someone an independent, responsible adult are also the foundation for making them a good employee. Post-secondary transition programs like the Discover Program



Vista students in Job Development Group discussing how to prepare for a job interview

at Vista build these fundamental skills. In the program, students learn three core areas in addition to vocational training: life skills, cognitive and social behavior, and community involvement. Jordan Shamas, Vista's Discover Program Lead, explains, "It is important to set students up for success. To maintain a job, whether it is paid or volunteer, all adults must ensure they have proper hygiene, look presentable, and respect others, among practicing other positive behaviors independently." For example, if a student is having difficulty

waking up on time for their programmatic group, they most likely would struggle to be on time for work as well. Many skills covered in Discover also give students more potential employment opportunities, like being able to utilize public transportation. To ultimately achieve a higher level of independence, the student and Vista staff collaborate to find strategies to help the student be successful.

Once the student begins to feel comfortable with these core areas, they engage in an employment assessment to see how they do in a vocational setting. This evaluative process is important because even students with a lot of employment experience may respond differently when they are out of their comfort zone in a new environment, sometimes for the better. At [Creations](#), Vista's retail gift store in downtown Madison, CT, students are able to complete employment assessments. Eugene, a new student with autism in Discover, has been enthusiastic about his employment journey, but was apprehensive to consider positions involving money because of a past negative experience. At Creations, Eugene was able to practice at the cash register and demonstrated his ability to correctly handle money, regaining confidence in his own abilities. This foundation of core skills and low-pressure assessment opportunities give students the confidence to pursue the next phase of their employment journey.

When the student is ready, they move on to the second step on the path to employment by beginning job site training and job development. Students work with job developers in small groups and one-on-one sessions to determine their strengths and potential for growth, talk through how to present themselves and act while at work, and explore areas of interest for their careers. Often, this process involves empowering the student to make their own career choices and expand their thinking. John Brown, one of the Job Developers at Vista, says, "Some students initially struggle to recognize their own passions or strengths, which can be turned into a career path. We ask the students what they want to pursue, so we are supporting their employment journeys rather than making decisions for them." Job sites are one way for students to see if their interests could turn into a career. Students work with job coaches and their

supervisors at job sites to gain employment experience and develop their skills. Vista has numerous partnerships with employers along the Connecticut shoreline to offer a variety of job site opportunities to students, depending on the student's interests. In addition to Vista's retail store, Creations, Vista has a second social enterprise designed to offer employment opportunities to students, Ventures Business Services. Ventures is designed to give students the chance to explore a variety of employment opportunities while working with a team specifically trained to engage with individuals with disabilities. Students at their job sites can practice in fulfillment, commercial cleaning, property maintenance or as a receptionist. Because Ventures is designed for those with disabilities, students can experiment with how to set up their environment to achieve success. Beatrice, an individual with disabilities who now works at Ventures, realized, "One of my strengths is being able to focus when I am in a quiet environment. I can get distracted when the environment is loud, so some people I grew up with were surprised that I am good at a job that requires so much concentration!" Ultimately, the student chooses a career direction and moves onto the next step, applying for positions.



Eugene at a Vista's retail store, Creations, practicing handling money during a job assessment to evaluate his vocational skills

The final stage of gaining employment involves preparing the student for the interview process and cultivating a relationship with the potential employer. "Employment is all about relationships," explains Brown. "We build relationships with employers so that they are open, comfortable and ready to work with our students. Just as we educate our students about what is expected of them as an employee, we create clear expectations with our employers so that everyone is on the same page." Students are frequently nervous about the interview or pre-hiring assessment process, but preparation is key to their success. By going over each component of the process and engaging in mock interviews, the student practices extensively before scheduling an official interview or on-site job assessment.

see Success on page 13



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Vista Life Innovations offers a post-secondary residential program located along the Connecticut shoreline dedicated to providing services and resources to assist individuals with disabilities achieve personal success and transition into adulthood.

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Taking a Person-Centered Approach to Teaching Meaningful Employment Skills

By Megan Robinson Joy, PhD, BCBA,
Ashley McClellan, MEd, LBS,
Sasha Birosik, BA,
Amanda L. Duffy, MEd, BCBA, LBS,
Emily Judovits,
Trevor Marsh,
and John Pagnoni
Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health

A person-centered approach is vital for providing effective employment training for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In an effort to capture the experiences of those who have received employment training, we conducted interviews with three members of the [Devereux Pennsylvania Community Adult Autism Partnership Program \(CAAPP\)](#) self-advocacy group: Emily Judovits, John Pagnoni and Trevor Marsh.

The goal was to gather feedback from individuals receiving employment services and integrate this input with literature on evidence-based practices, identifying skills and training experiences that would have the greatest impact for individuals being served.

Through these interviews, three common themes emerged. Travel training, work-related social skills and gaining assistance from natural supports were identified as key areas for instruction to promote success in the employment setting. Emily, John and Trevor discussed the importance of these skills and the strategies that best helped them learn.

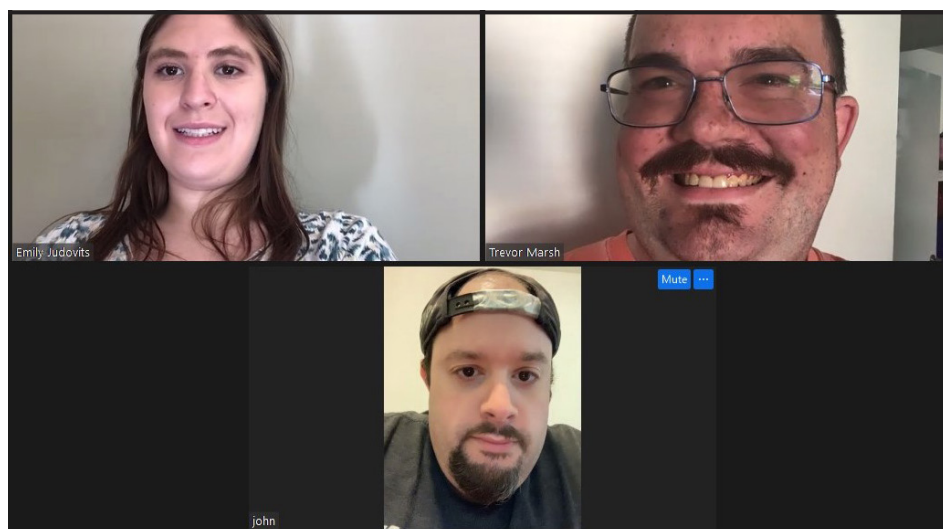
Behavioral Skills Training

During the interviews, Emily, John and Trevor identified repeated practice, including modeling, role plays and self-assessment as strategies that proved most effective in gaining job-related skills. These strategies are the core components of Behavioral Skills Training (BST), an evidence-based treatment package in which trainees rehearse target skills until mastery is demonstrated (Reid et al., 2003).

BST incorporates instruction, demonstration of the skill (modeling), practice (role-play) and feedback on how the skill was performed. This sequence is repeated until the person demonstrates competency with the skill. All individuals interviewed discussed the complexities of skills required at their jobs, including skills related to the task, and skills related to interacting with co-workers, supervisors and customers. The interviewees stated that repeated practice of different skills is critical for learning how to manage the variety of situations that can arise.

Social Skills

When working toward securing employment, social skills specific to the job can be a vital component in maintaining employment, while promoting positive relationships with supervisors and co-workers. A review completed by Wong et al. (2015) suggests a need for research focused on employment skills for individuals with ASD, particularly related to social and communication skills. Commonly occurring social situations in employment settings include interactions with a supervisor, co-worker,



Recipients of Devereux's community-based adult autism services help inform the direction of future programming.

or customer. These situations might include asking for help, responding appropriately to corrective feedback, making confirming statements when given instructions, and notifying a supervisor when a task is completed (Bross et al. 2019; Grob, et al. 2019). Training loosely to account for novel situations and problem-solving opportunities is important to prepare someone for the unexpected, such as a customer requesting an obscure item in a retail setting or handling a difficult customer service situation.

While Emily described some instruction regarding social skills prior to employment, both she and Trevor stated they did not receive training on social skills for their work setting prior to starting their jobs. Both agreed they would have benefited from working on specific social skills relative to their positions, such as learning how to deal with difficult customers or recruiting assistance.

Natural Supports

Formal supports make use of job coaches, whose responsibility is to support an individual in learning the skills needed to independently fulfill the responsibilities of his or her job. Job coaches are a helpful, short-term support for those with autism; however, they might hinder individuals' progress toward fully integrating into an employment setting by missing the development of relationships with co-workers (Mautz et al., 2001).

A natural support is someone who is already present in the work environment and agrees to provide support outside of his or her regular job responsibilities (Storey, 2003). Natural supports can help with job-specific skills (e.g., providing feedback and prompts, as necessary) and can assist individuals in integrating socially in the workplace in a more naturalistic manner (Storey, 2003).

Trevor discussed how natural supports were important to him, both on the job site and outside of work, stating: "My co-workers support me at work. One of them came to a fundraiser for autism supports and came and supported me."

Additionally, a natural support may serve as an advocate in some scenarios for the supported co-worker. John provided an example of how natural supports are both necessary and looked upon with high re-

port connections to promote lasting success in the workplace.

Travel Training

One of the most important skills for the post-high school transition to employment is being able to use transportation independently (Gallup, Lamothe & Gallup, 2015). John, Emily and Trevor all indicated that learning to use transportation was a critical need for obtaining employment, yet only John received travel training when he was in school.

Limited research on travel training has focused on using public transportation (Lindsay & Lamptey, 2019). While research has demonstrated positive outcomes for teaching individuals how to use public transportation (Price, Marsh, Fisher, 2019), there are a number of significant barriers to using public transit as a main source of transportation. Many individuals do not have access to public transportation, and even those who do, may experience issues with wait times and regular availability (Pfeiffer et al., 2021). For these reasons, many people are turning to ride share services, including Uber and Lyft. These services are often widely available in areas not served by public transit. Importantly, adult service agencies are beginning to offer funding for using these services.

Future research will need to explore how

see *Person-Centered* on [page 14](#)

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The “Why” of Disability Unemployment

By Nicholas A. Villani
President/CEO
Career and Employment Options, Inc.

Understanding the differential in the employment rates for people with disabilities and those without, including the length of time it has remained unchanged, requires an introspection into all the current practices and models. It also begs the question of “why” this has remained for so long and “why” this discrepancy still eludes the people involved, their families, educators and vocational rehabilitation professionals.

The average employment rate for people with disabilities in New York State has remained in the mid-thirty percentile since 2008 until 2018 (Disabilitystatistics.org). Individuals without disabilities are in the high seventy or low eighty percentile. We may have yet to fully comprehend “why” our society has unintentionally created a caste system that inhibits the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce.

Our field’s response to address this social ill is often defining the benefits to businesses and outreach to them for education toward employing people with disabilities. The answer may be more complicated than just businesses needing to be educated in pursuing and hiring all individuals equally. If that were the case, there wouldn’t be discrepancies in any



Nicholas A. Villani

ethnic or racial group in the American workforce or the continued lack of improvement for people with disabilities in the workforce. The inequity to participate in the workforce mimics the conditions of other caste systems that implemented and sustained for very different reasons but leaves us with the same result.

Individuals with disabilities have been relegated to a lesser role or excluded from the workforce not due to their ability or lack thereof but as the result of this caste system that starts with these unequal systems. The real answer may start in the recognition that we have a caste system that

starts while in elementary, middle and high school leading into college and eventually into the workforce. The systems (special education and vocational rehabilitation) that are intended to address this condition have had minimal impact upon the employment rates with little to no change for at least the last twenty years. What may be missing is a truly integrated system for acknowledging and combining resources and flipping the paradigm regarding who is educating who.

In Isabel Wilkerson’s book “Caste,”¹ she explains that the historical context of the suppression of these groups was the result of racial, religious and ethnic prejudices. Those in the lower caste are suppressed and unable to fully engage in their society. After describing the effects, she also states the negative economic impact that this suppression creates. Clearly the situation in America with people with disabilities is not the same as those examples and without the animus those cultures adopted. Truth be told, our caste system for people with disabilities is silent and may be the result of a long-standing sense of powerlessness baked into the students during their experience in schools by the lack of preparation for their career world. In essence, the children and adults in that caste are the children of those people not in a caste. In turn, the silo effect of businesses, special education and rehab providers only intersecting when a person graduates may be over, as the awareness of unemployment becomes more prevalent. The lack of integrated thought contributes to the problem and maintains the caste system.

Each party in the paradigm failing to integrate innovation and communication is part of the issue. The vocational rehabilitation field’s failure is integrating new innovations regularly and only through incremental regulation changes. The business world’s shortcomings fall on the over-reliance on over-competitive models for recruitment and hiring with no long-term positive effectiveness demonstrated. Included should be training and support for all employees not just those with “visible” disabilities. Lastly, special education’s sense of disconnect to the employment situation of their former students cannot be ignored. Graduating is not the only goal; preparation for a career life through transition supports should be emphasized. Each party of the paradigm is creating a silo effect of operating independently while not acknowledging or pursuing how to address this issue through an inverted model. The sense of normalcy left by each party leaving each other to solve the problem while unintentionally reinforcing the status quo creating a de facto caste system is almost impossible to eliminate.

Educating the Educators

What would be a major step forward is an inverted model of developing training of educators and vocational rehabilitation staff by business professionals in how they train their employees. “Educate the Educators” in how businesses operate and train would break the barriers using communication. The business of employers is to enable their business to grow and thrive. The business of special educators and vocational

rehabilitation is to enable their students and clients to grow and thrive. Let’s connect the two missions.

Providers of services must be exposed to training and hiring practices that businesses use to improve their instruction. Although Universal Design Learning models are gaining traction, currently educators and rehab professionals are only exposed to the needs of business at the time the person is crossing the threshold to graduation or employment. What is needed are Superintendent Days that are filled with teachers learning from the business sector on how they train their employees. The academic requirements, the social requirements, the skills for comprehension and problem solving for successful training of employees should all be taught to teachers. Teachers can integrate those initiatives when providing instruction. The specifics of how those skills are measured and tracked by the business for their employee’s benefit should be integrated into curriculum. Starting to recognize and be cognizant of this at the earliest ages would enable teachers and providers the capacity to integrate those training practices into the curriculum or pedagogical practice.

Rehab professionals during their intake and preparation for the employment can inject business practices into their preparation and instruction. Also, if rehab professionals were regular participants in business trainings, we can offer those businesses insight into the needs of people with disabilities in their learning and social requirements.

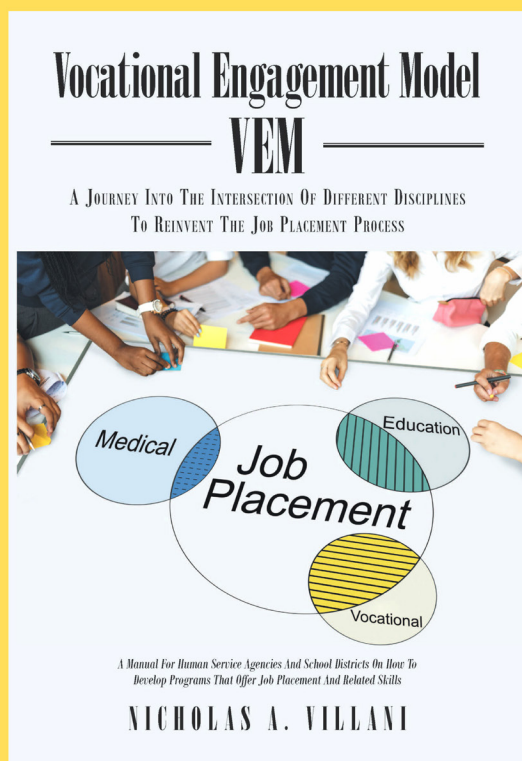
In our agency I have implemented a program called Career Lab for schools that includes not only instruction in career skills but integrates business leaders into the instruction and measurement. They rate students on their elevator pitches and interview skills. This year we will be working with our Business Advisory Council to develop an instruction module for them to provide to teachers and rehab professionals. We also use this model for Vocational Engagement Model, which is clarified in my book,² “VEM, A Journey Into the Intersection of Different Disciplines to Reinvent the Job Placement Process.”

Eliminating a caste system is a daunting challenge taking time, communication and commitment. If you or your child is a person with a disability, the time is now! How to impact the employment of people requires an acknowledgement of the condition and an intersection of each discipline and stakeholder to communicate and learn from each other to affect meaningful change. Let’s invite businesses to the process and let’s ensure that students and adults with disabilities, their families, schools and rehab providers integrate different disciplines into the process to eliminate the caste system that has so unfairly impacted the students and adults.

Nicholas A. Villani, President and CEO of Career and Employment Options, Inc., has worked in the field of vocational training and employment for people with special needs since 1982. He has administered programs, written grants, designed programs and was influential in much of the

see Unemployment on page 17

The Vocational Engagement Model is the evolutionary change in the provision of job placement services. It encourages “guardrails” for staff to work within while retaining their own creativity. The end result is total personal engagement, management of the job placement process with true cost optimization.



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What is the goal of VEM?

The goal is to share with others and synthesize all the parties involved in the employment process for people with disabilities. The intent is that the reader will use the model to transform their programs.

For more information email nvillani@ceoincworks.com or visit <https://www.ceoincworks.com>.

Making a Case for the IEP Diploma When It Comes to Employment

By Danielle Levine
Self-Advocate
AHRC New York City

I was the girl who was afraid of her own shadow. I was afraid of a lot of things. I was afraid about what people might think. People always doubted me. I was too nervous to speak in front of people. I would never go on stage. I was afraid to do anything.

A school social worker once told my mom, Sheri, that my IQ was very low and that it was likely to remain at that level. She also said I'd never have the ability to hold a job. She underestimated my ability, and I proved her wrong. (I'm glad my mom continued to have me evaluated, as others did not agree with the social worker's assessment. I was initially diagnosed with mild autism; that was changed to pervasive developmental disorder and eventually to mild intellectual disability.)

I am a self-advocate for people with disabilities. I have advocated before federal, state and local officials on a variety of issues. I'm sure no one who knew me at The League School would ever have imagined me in this role. I guess I get the advocacy gene from my mom. She really has advocated for me and has been with me since this journey began. My mom always taught me to believe in myself and that everyone is unique in their own way. I learned from her how to stand up for myself.

Employers Should Recognize the IEP Diploma

One of the areas I'm particularly passionate about is employment. Everybody should have the right to work and earn a living. People with disabilities are no different.

While there are many barriers to employment for people with developmental disabilities, one of the biggest is the Individualized Education Program (IEP) diploma. I graduated with that diploma from The League School at age 21. It's nearly impossible to get a job because the IEP diploma is not as universally recognized as a high school diploma or GED, better known as high school equivalency diploma.

People with disabilities have a lot to contribute but they struggle to find employment opportunities to do so. We can do more and just want the chance to prove ourselves.

I would like to make it easier for people with disabilities who finish high school to get jobs. It is very difficult to get a job because we face a barrier every time we try to apply for a job or go to an interview. Employers only interview people who have a high school diploma or a GED. I feel that is discrimination and is unfair because I can do just as great as a person who has a high school diploma.

Recently this problem has become worse because most applications for entry-level positions must now be done online. Online job applications do not allow people with IEPs to explain their credentials and instead removes them from consideration for positions before they ever have a chance to get an interview or meet a potential manager.

All we want is for people with disabilities to have the opportunity to get interviews, so we can show employers what we



Danielle Levine makes her case for employment opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities during a visit with an aide for U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney.

have to offer. I am capable of doing more on the job and if this change is made I and other people with disabilities will have the chance to prove ourselves.

Advocacy Leads to NYS Senate Bill

During my senior year at AHRC New York City's [Melissa Riggio Higher Education Program \(MRHEP\)](#) at Kingsborough Community College (KCC), I made my third trip to Albany to advocate for change in employment laws. I couldn't believe it! My work paid off when then-Senator David Carlucci sponsored a bill, S-3890: "Allows the Individualized Education Program or IEP diploma to be accepted whenever a high school diploma or GED is required for employment." Unfortunately, the bill died in committee.

I was fortunate to attend MRHEP shortly after finishing high school. I developed my advocacy skills and co-taught a class called *Advocacy Unlimited* to share what I learned with students throughout AHRC NYC and KCC to help them become stronger self-advocates.

Matthew Estep, AHRC NYC's Self-Advocacy Advisor, reminded me how nervous I was during my first trip to Albany. But after each visit with a legislator or his/her aides, I grew more comfortable. During my last trip, I flagged down a legislator that I had met before to follow up on our meeting; I wasn't intimidated anymore.

I enjoy mentoring the newer self-advocates and can especially relate to them about overcoming their nerves.

Developing Office Administration Skills

At MRHEP, I majored in office administration. I took typing classes, courses in office communications, and different computer application classes. That's where I met Tony Angeline, the Corporate Account Developer on the Employment Team with AHRC NYC's Adult Day Services. He works with many MRHEP graduates.

I told Tony that I was interested in administrative work in a professional office

environment. I let him know about my desire to do more than basic office tasks, including filing, shredding documents, etc. I wanted to work on a computer, use a database and deal with clients.

(Editor's Note: Tony Angeline is the AHRC NYC point person for [CCE: The Consortium for Customized Employment](#),"

which is a consortium of 14 agencies in New York City that provide services and support for people with I/DD. This type of consortium is unique to NYC. In his role, he works closely with the Director of the CCE, Karen Waltuck, and the Assistant Director, Wendy Banner. He told them about Danielle and her qualifications for office administration. The CCE contacts agency members with any employment opportunity they develop which might be suitable for a participant. Banner contacted Angeline because she thought Danielle would be a good fit to work in a doctor's office.)

In January 2020, with Tony's help, I got a great job as an administrative assistant at a doctor's office in Herald Square in Manhattan. I loved that job. Unfortunately, four weeks later, the job stopped due to COVID-19. I pray every day that I can return to that job soon.

People with developmental disabilities can do just as great as a person with a high school diploma or a GED. I proved that in college, when I scored the highest mark in my advanced office administration class. I'll prove it again when I get back to work.

Note: An IEP diploma is different than a high school diploma.

Danielle Levine is a fierce self-advocate who wants to promote more employment opportunities for people with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities. She is 28 years old (Note: turning 29 on July 8th) and lives with her family in Brooklyn.



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What Benefits Should an Employer Have When Hiring Neurodiverse Employees?

By Andrew Komarow, MSFS, CFP®
Founder
Planning Across the Spectrum

With an ever-shifting trend toward hiring more neurodiverse employees, we are seeing major profit potential for financial and technology companies. These types of employers have begun to realize and capitalize on the unique value that a team of neurodiverse employees can bring to the table. Around the globe, more and more organizations are starting to launch Autism and neurodiverse hiring initiatives. With roughly 1/6 of individuals falling somewhere within [the spectrum of neurodiversity](#), three common questions have begun to pop up:

1. Are the benefits I am offering inclusive enough to encompass the needs of the entire scope of types of employees I have?
2. Are there better opportunities I could be presenting to not only new hires, but my current employees as well?
3. What services can I turn to that will help me find the right benefits for my employees?

Let's break down the types of benefits you



Andrew Komarow, MSFS, CFP®

may be offering, how you can shape them to fit your entire team's needs, and how the benefit planning services offered by Planning Across the Spectrum can help you maximize benefits for your entire workforce.

Insurance
(Medical, Life, and Disability)

While all insurances have unique talking points, it is very important to note a few key things when it comes to presenting

these types of benefits to potential and current employees of your neurodivergent team. By doing so, you can make sure that everyone is set up for success.

Make sure your plan documents are clear, concise, and easy to read.

If possible, include the "why" in the documents. A short list of what each type of benefit is, how it works, and why it is important will be helpful in giving your employee as much information and room to plan as possible.

Make sure to include a distinct and clear timeline as to when each piece of information is due, when each piece of the plan will go into effect, and when and if things will change over time.

Medical Insurance - Neurodivergent individuals may have unique medical needs, and a good medical insurance benefit package should address them. However, the neurodivergent population is not a monolith, and you must consider that some plans may be counterproductive depending on an individual employee's situation. For example, [high deductible health plans \(HDHPs\)](#) and [contributions to a health savings account](#) may be a perfect fit for someone without Medicare/Medicaid, but individuals who are enrolled in government funded programs will likely be ineligible for an HDHP/HSA.

Likewise, another popular plan type rewards employees for completing health-related goals and activities by offering discounts on their premiums, among other things. On the surface, this seems like a great idea, but you need to consider the types of individuals you are employing and whether these "simple" health goals are truly attainable for them. Moreover, studies have shown that these types of plans often have negative side effects on morale.

With that in mind, it's important to think outside the box and consider other programs and opportunities that are available to neurodiverse and disabled employees, often at little to no extra cost. If all this sounds overwhelming, don't worry – [we can help you pinpoint the best health benefits program](#) for all of your employees.

Life Insurance - As a rule of thumb, try not to offer life insurance benefits just because someone walked in and offered you a box to check off. While tempting to offer something inexpensive, it is critical to work with a broker and carrier who understand the neurodiverse population that is being served and can read some of the finer details of the life insurance policy. Moreover, many individuals with complex health needs may be ineligible for life insurance

see Benefits on page 33

Identity Language: In Service of a More Inclusive Workplace

By Jillian Noyes
Director of Digital Content
Planning Across the Spectrum

As diversity and inclusion initiatives grow in popularity, it is important to consider how they contribute to shaping workplace attitudes. Programs that do not take current developments happening in the communities being serviced into account will come across as outdated at best, and harmful at worst. Such is the case with initiatives concerning autistic employees. Awareness about key issues and accommodations is only the start; true inclusion requires employers and employees to actively make autistic people feel understood and welcome.

One of the ways employers can do this is by listening to autistic perspectives on identity language. Identity language refers to the terminology used to describe a disabled or neurodivergent individual in relation to their diagnosis. On the surface, it may seem like an odd thing to dwell over. "Person with autism" and "autistic person" do not usually come up in everyday work conversations, unless it is in the context of water cooler chatter about someone's relative.

I would argue, however, that identity language is a valuable lens from which to examine and interrogate workplace attitudes surrounding autism. The way autistic people use identity language to take ownership



Jillian Noyes

over their identity - and the way employers and employees may use different language (Kenny et al., 442) - reveals fundamental differences in how autism is perceived. Addressing this disconnect is one way in which autistic people can feel valued, respected, and most importantly, heard by their non-autistic workplace peers.

A Brief History of Identity Language

The history of identity language reveals how societal views of disability inform the way we talk about it. Beginning in the 18th century, identity-first language ("they are autistic") was used to describe disabled people, including those on the autism spec-

trum. The placement of these diagnostic terms in relationship to the person reveals their ties to the medical model of disability, which defines individuals by their diagnosis rather than their personhood (Stollznow, 176). Thus, these terms tacitly encouraged the general populace to see disabled people as nothing more than their deficits (Palumbo & Noyes, 2021).

As medical terms like "autistic," "lame," and "retarded" devolved into slurs, disability activists put forth person-first language ("they have autism") as a new way of discussing disability. Their desire to "put the person first" was an explicit rejection of the medical model's implication that a person is defined by their disability. They further argued that person-first language eliminates stereotypes by forcing the listener and speaker to acknowledge that "disabilities" are labels rather than defining characteristics (Stollznow, 164). This would have the effect of reducing the stigma surrounding autism and other disabilities.

What the activists behind person-first language failed to anticipate was the neurodiversity movement, which frames conditions like autism as naturally occurring variations in brain chemistry (Singer, 64). Many autistic activists argued that their diagnosis impacted their entire perception of self and was an inextricable part of their identity. Identity-first language, they claimed, more accurately reflected this fact (Stollznow, 174-175). They further point out that extricating autism from the person,

as person-first language does, implies that autism is a shameful and disordered way of being (Palumbo & Noyes, 2021).

The Implications of Identity Language

Far from being simple labels, identity language is a tool used by autistic people to write their own narratives. For a group that has historically been talked over, infantilized, belittled, and devalued, their ownership of language is an act of defiance. It subverts popular narratives that claim autistic people have minimal agency (much less self-awareness) and forces people to reckon with their own internalized ableism. That is why the identity language debate matters: it upends the status quo and turns societal perceptions of autism on their head.

Unsurprisingly, this linguistic revolution has created a schism between autistic people and non-autistic people (Kenny et al., 447). While many autistic people see the use of identity-first language as subversive and transformative, many others see it as offensive and strange.

When it comes to workplace inclusion initiatives, addressing this dissonance matters. Non-autistic people may have the best of intentions when they use "person with autism," without realizing how that language implicitly reinforces a workplace culture of othering autistic people (Collier,

see Identity Language on page 30

Autism Through a Clinician's Perspective

By Lisa Lichtenstein
Psychotherapist
MOVIA Robotics

I've been licensed in California as a Marriage and Family Therapist for over 18 years and my career passion and good fortune has allowed me to treat children with developmental disorders, including Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as well as high functioning adults.

Therapy is a profound process that assists ASD individuals in growing and developing new skills and behaviors. However, I always pondered about identifying a remedy, a tangible object, clients can use at home in-between therapy sessions in order to reinforce new skills, behaviors, and patterns in order to expedite learning. I knew therapy-homework was necessary for people to exercise portions of their therapy sessions to promote continuity. All too often much is forgotten from weekly appointments and psychotherapy homework is limited and one dimensional. For decades I searched for a solution until I finally found a company utilizing what they call Robot-Assisted Instruction (RAI), which encapsulated a similar concept of capturing treatment interventions in a tangible product to give people the ability to practice and reinforce the positive changes at home. Moreover, behavioral rehearsal is required to establish growing a new behavior, in order to promote growth.



Kebbi is MOVIA's first "HomePal." It is an Educational Robot that integrates artificial intelligence, software, and hardware technology to provide a variety of facial expressions, body movements, and communicative interactions. Kebbi provides a unique set of capabilities that work very well for the home or school environment. These interactive capabilities provide users with a heartwarming and educational experience.

ior, in order to promote growth.

Working with Autism Spectrum Disorder individuals is challenging in identifying their needs and preferences. In all forms of psychotherapy and behavioral therapy

rapport must be established between client and therapist in order for the foundation of trust to be secure and effective. With ASD individuals, their sensitivity to change and stimuli make the delivery of treatment in-

terventions challenging, especially when communication is a limitation. In addition, ASD individuals thrive when stimuli and people are consistent and predictable including body movements, voice tone, and, at times, routines.

Another challenge I've found in working with the ASD population is that there is a limitation for clinicians, families, peers, and school personnel in understanding ASD individuals' thoughts and feelings outside of a school or organization's curriculum. Said differently, what do ASD individuals desire - what are their personal dreams or aspirations? When the understanding of the ASD population is limited, the supportive people in ASD individuals' lives are often left feeling confused and perplexed on how to proceed, in order to get inside the minds of their loved ones so they can grow and develop into their highest potential, to live a life with maximum independency, quality, and functionality.

Although I've been working with people with Developmental Disorders since my junior year of undergraduate college, I've felt limited with treatment interventions up until now. During the pandemic, I happened upon a robot and researched the origins and information surrounding it. I discovered a company, [MOVIA Robotics](#), producing Robot-Assisted Instruction (RAI): a robot, PC, and tablet with a

see *Perspective on page 22*

Success from page 8

This effort becomes worth it when the student enters the process confidently and is able to secure employment, which can be supported by a job coach if beneficial. For those beginning the journey, it can be hard to imagine finding, keeping, and thriving in a career. Yet, it is possible. Vista's three steps to employment success are used every day by students in the Discover Program, their college-like transition program. Graduates of the Discover Program often elect to settle along the Connecticut shoreline while receiving select services from Vista's Engage Program. As of April 1, 2021, nearly 90% of the Engage members wanting paid employment had paid positions. These Engage members work for the nearly 70 different community employer partnerships Vista has along the Connecticut shoreline. It is inspiring to see individuals from Vista building relationships, receiving praise and promotions, becoming financially empowered and giving back to their communities through their employment. Frank, an individual with autism who has worked at his position for three years, is proud that his work in-

volves shipping components used on emergency vehicles. For Frank: "Of course, I like working because of the money I earn, but I also am glad that I am giving back to the community with my work...I'm happy with the success I've had, and I hope to accelerate and keep growing in my career as I develop a more sophisticated skill set." Regardless of where you are on your employment journey, it is never too late to imagine the possibilities.

Please note: The names of the Vista students and members in this article have been changed for privacy reasons. Becky Lipnick is the Communications Lead at Vista Life Innovations. For over 30 years, Vista has supported individuals with disabilities achieve personal success. Learn more at www.VistaLifeInnovations.org or contact Becky at BLipnick@VistaLifeInnovations.org.

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The Key to True Success in College and Beyond

By Beth Felsen, MA
Founder and Success Coach
Spectrum Transition Coaching, LLC

Success in college is not guaranteed, especially for autistic students. About 60% of full-time undergraduates receive a bachelor's degree within 6 years of beginning college at a four-year institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Only 36% of young adults on the autism spectrum attempt postsecondary education of any kind between high school and their early 20s, including 2-year or 4-year colleges or vocational education (Roux et al., 2015), and only 38.8% of them will complete their degrees (Jackson et al., 2018). If you do the math, only about 14% of autistic high-school students graduate from college.

And at what cost? A recent white paper published by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) points out that completion of a college degree by an autistic young adult may merely measure persistence, not success (2020). Autistic self-advocates who participated in the focus group upon which the white paper was based reported varied definitions of



Beth Felsen, MA

college success, including full inclusion in campus social life. Closer examination of post-college employment outcomes was also seen as a measure of college success (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2020). But persistence through graduation without a sense of belonging during college or a meaningful career in one's desired field does not seem like much of a success to me.

The ASAN focus-group participants identified difficulty acclimating to college - transitioning from the life of a high schooler to that of a collegian - as one of several barriers to college success. They reported feeling unprepared for the academic, social, and independent-living expectations encountered at college (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2020). Heading to college often means leaving behind familiar support systems. The stress of these non-academic (and ever-present) aspects of the college experience can make it harder to focus on academics, which can lead to poor grades. And poor grades can further increase stress. Exacerbating these issues are a lack of peer support: 57% of autistic teens have lots of difficulty making and keeping friends (Shattuck et al., 2018). Once this vicious cycle gets going, it can be very difficult for students to pull themselves out of it, especially for the 76% of autistic teens with co-occurring ADHD, anxiety, or depression (Shattuck et al., 2018).

Autistic students may not realize how much support they receive from their families. Nearly half of those teens, for example, have parents who spend several hours a week arranging and coordinating the student's healthcare (Shattuck et al., 2018). When students start college and lose those supports, the cycle of stress begins. High schools must provide comprehensive accommodations to support academic progress, but transition teams are ill-equipped to discuss social and independent-living skills or how to obtain accommodations in college. The same scaffolding that helps autistic students flourish in high school may cause them to flounder during the college transition.

When I work with autistic high-school students and their families, I encourage them to consider how the daily rhythm and requirements of college life differ from high school. The strong support systems these students have in high school provide an excellent safety net as they work to build crucial college-readiness skills in areas like self-advocacy, executive functioning, social communication and interaction, and in-

dependent living. Building these skills also helps these students build confidence and increase their chances for true success and fulfillment in college and beyond.

To contact Beth or learn more about her work with autistic young adults, visit her website www.spectrumtransitioncoaching.com.

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identified best practices, such as BST, can be applied to teaching the skills needed to use ride share services. Emily pointed out important safety skills that need to be included in training, such as matching the car description/identification with the app and texting a family member/friend when using these services. It is also important to prepare individuals to cope with unpredictable situations. For example, recently, when Trevor's Uber did not arrive on time, he needed to rely on his problem-solving skills to quickly identify an alternative solution to get to work. With this kind of thoughtful teaching, ride share services can greatly expand the options for transportation and access to meaningful employment.

Future Directions

Despite having some degree of instruction, Emily, John and Trevor all felt they would have benefited from receiving additional training before they transitioned to an

employment setting. Employed individuals must be able to adapt when situations break down; learning flexibility and coping strategies are important for long-term success.

The skills our interviewees identified are complex and require significant practice with different examples before feeling comfortable. While effective technologies exist to teach and demonstrate these skills (e.g., BST), it takes time to build these repertoires. Employment social skills, working with natural supports and travel training need to be targeted during adolescence, with systematic teaching approaches in a variety of settings for individuals to be prepared for the workforce in adulthood.

Megan Robinson Joy, PhD, BCBA, is Director of Pennsylvania Autism Services at Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health. Ashley McClennen, MEd, LBS, is Clinical Manager, Sasha Birosik, BA, is Community Outreach Coordinator, Amanda L. Duffy, MEd, BCBA, LBS, is Program Director and Emily Judovits, Trevor Marsh, and John Pagnoni are Participants at the Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health Community Adult Autism

Partnership Program (CAAPP). For more information, please contact Dr. Megan Joy at mjoy@devereux.org or 267-314-1292.

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Supporting the Transition to Employment for Adolescents with Autism

By Ashleigh J. Hillier, PhD
Professor of Psychology
University of Massachusetts Lowell

Graduating from high school and transitioning to the world of work is an extremely important and exciting milestone. However, for many young adults with autism obtaining and maintaining employment can present some unique challenges. Unfortunately, despite the vastly increasing numbers of individuals being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), adult services for this population are seriously lacking (Debevois, 2008; Hillier et al., 2007). Many autistic young adults remain unnecessarily dependent on family members, unable to reach their full potential. They often live at home, are unemployed or underemployed, or participate in programs that are inappropriate, leaving many parents worried about what the future holds for their adult child. This is in spite of the fact that autistic individuals bring many strengths to the workplace such as attention to detail, trustworthiness, reliability, and low absenteeism (Howlin, Jordan, & Evans, 1995; Morgan, 1996). In addition, aspects of jobs that other employees may find unattractive including social isolation or repetitiveness often appeal to persons with ASD (Van Bourgondien & Woods, 1992).



Ashleigh J. Hillier, PhD

Although demands for employment services for adults with autism are increasing substantially, currently there are few specialized services available and not much is known about how best to support those with autism in achieving success. However, there are some strategies which may help empower autistic young adults to achieve rewarding, satisfying employment and make meaningful contributions to their

community and society as a whole. Strategies discussed here will emphasize the fundamentals, or “employment philosophies,” such as helping the individual realize what employment actually means, what jobs are like, and some of the realities of employment. These issues are critical for helping the young adult understand the importance of employment and the magnitude of the role it will (hopefully) play in their life.

Successful Employment: Preparation

Understanding the purpose of employment is critical for ensuring enthusiasm and motivation for the transition to the world of work. If an adolescent with autism does not fully grasp the fundamentals such as how important getting a job is going to be for them and why, a successful transition will be much harder to achieve. For an adolescent who is used to having many of their needs met by their parents, the idea of having to get a job is often not particularly appealing and may not seem to be something urgent. Many adolescents with autism may be reluctant to even think about life after high school when everything will change and there will be even greater expectations of them. Spending time thinking about some of the philosophy behind employment such as why it is important to have a job, what it means to have a job, what an employer is looking for in an employee, why being “independent”

is important, etc., will be critical.

Building a positive attitude and excitement towards getting a job is also important. The young adult can be reminded of why this transition is so positive, e.g., they will have their own money, they will meet new people, they will learn new skills, they will have something to do during the day, they will increase their self-confidence and improve their self-image, etc. Employment can be talked about as something which will be exciting and the individual will enjoy. Making plans for the future and identifying goals the adolescent would like to reach and how these goals can be achieved will help maintain enthusiasm for employment and also serve as a reminder that they need to be realistic in their employment expectations. It is also important that the young adult with autism has opportunities to gain insight into the huge variety of job options available and what these jobs are like. Adolescents can be encouraged to consider what career paths may suit them well before high school graduation. Due to the abstract nature of imagining what a particular job would be like, it can be difficult for anyone to decide what might be a good match for them regarding employment. Constant observation of what other people are doing while you are out and about can be helpful. This exercise can help the adolescent recognize the huge variety of

see Transition on page 32

Engagement in Special Interests Influences Well-Being and Provides Employment Opportunities in Neurodiverse Individuals

By Sharon Eva, OTR/L
Pediatric Occupational Therapist

A brief note on the terminology used in this article: While people should practice sensitivity towards various opinions, many adults on the autism spectrum have disclosed the preference of identity-first language over person-first language (Botha et al., 2020). Thus, identity-first language, such as “autistic individual” will be interchangeably used with “individual with autism” throughout this article (Botha et al., 2020).

Winter-Messiers et al. (2007) found that 90% of people with Asperger’s syndrome display special interests, which is so prevalent that it cannot be neglected in research and practice. Special interests are defined as various iterations of the same concept: “obsessions” (Klin et al., 2007, p. 90), “an intense focus on specific topics” (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012, p. 391), and more positively, “those passions that capture the mind, heart, time, and attention...providing the lens through which they view the world” (Winter-Messiers, 2007, p. 142). The topic of exploring engagement in special interest’s influence on well-being is important because individuals on the spectrum



Sharon Eva, OTR/L

are at a higher risk than neurotypical individuals for poor mental health outcomes (Teti et al., 2016), including increased rates of depression and anxiety (Robertson, 2009). Autistic individuals also have lower well-being and fewer positive emotions (Lord et al., 2020). Providing avenues for meaningful engagement and improved well-being of individuals on the spectrum is a serious imperative of practitioners and researchers.

Literature has shown that positive participation in special interests influences well-being of individuals on the spectrum. Many articles found that positive socialization around special interests combats depression and anxiety and provides avenues for increased well-being through social participation. Furthermore, the special interests have been described as avenues to build careers and provided employment opportunities. It has also been evident from literature that knowledge development around special interests influences well-being of individuals on the spectrum. An article by Lee et al. (2020) found in their special interests program that the students improved their coding skills, and this opportunity for skill development had a significant part in improving their well-being. Finally, literature has shown that increased confidence around special interests influenced well-being of individuals on the spectrum. In Winter-Messiers et al. (2007), the identified special interests had positive implications for home, school, and as future job opportunities. The youth said that their special interests were not just a fleeting curiosity, but they “defined who they are” (Winter-Messiers et al., 2007, p. 77). Similarly, in an article by Jordan and Caldwell-Harris which analyzed data through internet discussion forums, the autistic individuals noted that they drew their self-

worth from their special interests, similarly stating that the interests “define [them]” (2012, p. 400).

Formation of identity around special interests is what builds confidence, much like an adolescent who is part of a sports team: they refer to themselves with identity-first language i.e. “basketball players.” Furthermore, this shared identity provides a sense of belonging, a feeling that many individuals with autism have unfortunately lacked. Belonging to a group with a shared identity is a potent tool to improving well-being; special interests can aid in the acquisition of that tool. Engagement in special interests clearly produces positive participation and engagement, increased social skills, learning opportunities, and identity formation. Furthermore, the special interests were described as avenues to build careers and provided employment opportunities, looking to ways that engagement in special interests can be helpful long-term rather than as a temporally constrained characteristic (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012).

The power of the neurodiverse individual arguably lies in these special interests - their special interests help them to cultivate strengths such as attention to detail and reliability. These strengths can then translate to job-related skills, such as the requirements

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Doin' It My Autistic Way: Why Being Self-Employed Was the Logical Solution for Me

By Becca Lory Hector, CAS, BCCS
Autism & Neurodiversity Consultant/
Speaker/Author/Advocate
Evolving Skye, LLC

Ah, the wonderful world of work. It's a marvel, isn't it? The way we have all indirectly given up our individual freedoms in hot pursuit of the all mighty dollar. The way we semiconsciously reorder our priorities to accommodate all the time and energy this pursuit demands. The years spent participating in the unending ritual of 9-5, Monday through Friday, that requires so much more of us than our meager weekends offer in return. Decades making unhealthy habits out of coping mechanisms, simply to survive the work week. Or at least that's how it feels when you are autistic.

For autistics, the world of work is far from wonderful or marvelous. For us, it's more of a mental mystery that must be solved, and emulated, in order to earn your rewards. Or maybe think of it as a timed test in which failure means returning to the beginning with one less pencil and zero erasers. No matter the analogy you prefer, work for autistics is a mine field of unwritten social rules and nonsensical adult behavior in which we are required to participate, trauma aside.



Becca Lory Hector, CAS, BCCS

I am no different than my autistic peers. My job history is, by neurotypical standards, a giant mess. In the years leading up to my autism diagnosis at 36, I went through jobs like nobody had ever seen before, or so I thought. In the span of 15 years, I interviewed, got hired, and worked in 13 different jobs, in 11 different fields. I tried everything from being an executive

assistant, to working in construction, to being a veterinary technician. In each job, the cycle was the same and so was the trauma.

I would breeze through the interview process, confident my "crazy rolodex brain" would know enough to sound a little knowledgeable in the field, knowing that at some point I had read a book or watched a documentary about it, so a tidbit or two

would be filed away for just this occasion. The first day would always be the hardest. No way to properly prepare when you have no idea what you are getting into. But, after a day or two, I would have memorized most people's routines and have found the pattern for appropriate dress, bathrooming, and eating. After that it gets easy for a bit.

My brain loves information and learning a new skill is way up my alley. In each job, the first few weeks were fun. All kinds of information filling my brain, as it comes up with faster and better ways to do the tasks. But my brain will soon master it all, and that's when trouble sets in. With nothing new to learn, and 8 hours to occupy with only 4 hours' worth of work, I get bored. I start to notice that folks have noticed me and now they want to know more. In comes the social aspect of work, and I get sucked in, certain that this time I can master it. Sadly, that is never the case and, ultimately, it will begin to burn me out and lead to a meltdown. Then it's just a matter of time before I get a talk about my "dramatic" behavior in the office and get fired, or I quit first - all 13 times over the span of 15 years.

When my autism diagnosis entered the picture, I was in burnout and suicidal from my last "cycle" of work. It gave me the chance to rethink a lot of things in my life

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Unemployment from [page 10](#)

progress in the field of supported employment and transition for individuals with disabilities. As a presenter, he has trained hundreds of professionals in the field of vocational services across the United States. Mr. Villani was the administrator and oversaw the operations of services in the field of transition, vocational rehabilitation and day programs for major not-for-profit agencies on Long Island. Nick has been a leader in the field serving on the associations for the employment of individuals with special needs and has worked for not-for-profit and for-profit organizations performing transition services since 1990.

For more information email rvillani@ceoincworks.com or visit www.ceoincworks.com.

Footnotes

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Social Skills Intervention: Key Piece of the Employment Puzzle

By Michelle Gorenstein,
The Seaver Autism Center
and Michele Shapiro,
AHRC New York City

For the one-year period between April 2020 and March 2021, unemployment rates for people with disabilities in New York State averaged 16.2 percent, an increase of 8.9 percent over the prior year, according to the state Department of Labor's Division of Research and Statistics. This rate is significantly higher than for the general population - the monthly average unemployment rate for all New Yorkers between April 2020 and March 2021 was 11.3 percent, an increase of 7.5 percent. These latest figures seem consistent with the Centers for Disease Control's 2020 figure that only 17.9 percent of individuals with a disability are employed. Unfortunately, many people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities, including autism, are unemployed or underemployed.

A large proportion of these young adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) experience poor outcomes across various domains, but especially in employment and social engagement.¹⁻² Unsuccessful transitions to adulthood can increase the risk of poor health and social outcomes later in life.³⁻⁴⁻⁵ However, people on the spectrum



Michelle Gorenstein

are an extremely valuable and underutilized talent pool. Many traits that are present in individuals with ASD are an asset in the workplace. Individuals with ASD are highly dependable, honest, and direct. They can see the world through a different lens and may bring new ideas to the workplace. Some individuals with ASD display attention to detail and patience for repetitive tasks. Individuals with ASD can be literal and logical thinkers.



Michele Shapiro

Lack of Social Skills and Job Loss

Deficits in social skills are a core feature of ASD and a significant barrier to obtaining and maintaining successful employment. In fact, research suggests that up to 90 percent of job losses in individuals with disabilities are due to difficulties in social communication.⁶ Some challenges that individuals with ASD face with regards to employment include poor interview skills,

socially inappropriate behaviors, poor hygiene, and difficulties understanding others perspectives.⁷⁻⁸⁻⁹⁻¹⁰⁻¹³ Based on this research the [Seaver Autism Center](#) recognized the importance of creating a social skills curriculum for adults with ASD focused on the soft skills required to obtain and maintain successful employment. The Seaver Autism Center believes that targeted social skills groups are a critical piece to solving the employment problem for individuals with ASD. However, this is only one piece of the puzzle and must coincide with customized employment, traditional job coaching, workplace accommodations, and trainings on inclusion in the workplace.

The Seaver Autism Center developed a 15-week curriculum (Job Based Social Skills; J.O.B.S.S.) that is easy to disseminate and is based on The Interview Skills Curriculum (ISC)¹¹⁻¹² and the web-based social skills program, JobTIPS.¹⁴ J.O.B.S.S.⁷ is a structured group that incorporates psychoeducation, social skills training, and some Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques. Lessons covered in the J.O.B.S.S. curriculum include active listening, nonverbal communication, theory of mind, making a good impression, identifying emotions, coping strategies, problem solving, assertiveness, conversation skills, hidden rules, correspondence and social media, and interview skills.

see Social Skills on page 28

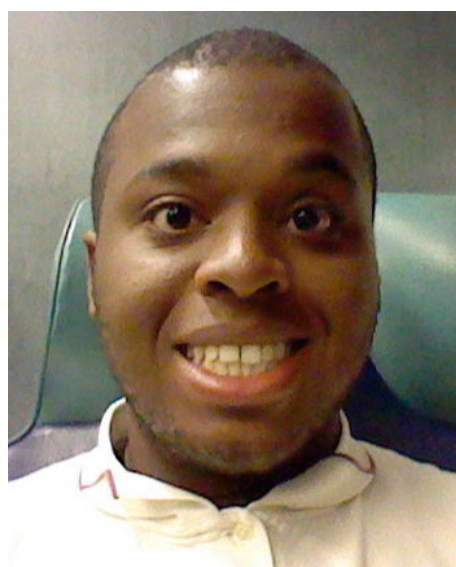
Matching Interests Key to Successful Employment for People with Autism

By Michael Lettman
Autism Advocate
AHRC New York City

From my perspective, people with autism need to find ways to get into work that they can enjoy with great happiness. I managed to enjoy working at a childcare center because it was a place that matched my interest in working with children.

So maybe if people with autism find jobs that are based on their interests, then maybe they would like to work there and gain experience. That way, they will have real jobs or volunteer opportunities at places where they can learn how to work before they're ready for employment. Maybe they will like their jobs or maybe they won't, but I'm sure there are lots of chances for autistic people to enjoy their work experience. People with autism want to work hard - even if they are not earning as much as they would like - THE MONEY IS WORTH IT. A lot of autistic people really need it for their future.

I never knew that some people with autism became successful in their lives by doing their own work. I'm very impressed with how some successful people on the autism spectrum can create, own, or run their own company/business related to their successful ideas - like how [Satoshi Tajiri created Game Freak](#) as its President and one of its Founders. Here's a list of some [Excellent Businesses by Successful Autistic People](#).



Michael Lettman

I feel bad when I hear that a high percentage of people with autism are unemployed or underemployed. This is NOT OK because everyone needs to work.

Enjoying My Early
Work/Volunteer Experience

During my student days at P373K (The Brooklyn Transition), I attended a Head Start class that volunteered at the Northside Center for Child Development. That class was taught by Heather Lifland who made sure we enjoyed our work as helpers in

preschool classes. It was an excellent work experience for me and I truly enjoyed it. It really felt like I had a real job (a job that I wouldn't mind having in my future). I was assigned to work in a UPK (Universal Pre-Kindergarten) class which was taught by a teacher known as Ms. Leda. (I don't recall her first name). I've had some good times being a helper for the young students, whom I referred to as "My Adorables." I did have some struggles which gave Ms. Leda some hard times when she was trying to do her job as a teacher. Ms. Heather Lifland helped me get better at my job for Ms. Leda and her young students. As a helper, I cleaned tables, swept the floor, sorted their work into folders, read a few stories to the children, put up the cots for their nap time, and joined them on their outside walks. I was a happy student working as a helper in a UPK class at a childcare center for my final three years with P373K.

Then Came "Change"

Summer School (2014): I had to be sent into another room with different teachers and different young students which was a "change." I was upset because I wanted to be in the same room with the same teachers and the same children until their graduation, but they wouldn't let me do that. I couldn't accept the "change," but after speaking with Ms. Lifland, along with a few weeks in the new preschool class, I managed to recover from the "change." I

enjoyed being their helper, even though it took a while for me to adjust to not being with Ms. Leda and her students during those summer school days.

Summer School (2015): I was assigned to work with someone in the kitchen of the childcare center. It was another "change," but I managed to not get too upset about it. I sorted bottles and other kitchen supplies, helped clean the plates and utensils, and helped deliver the food to the classrooms so the students could enjoy their breakfast, lunch, and snack. I didn't get to be with any Adorables during that time, but helping with their meals was very important, so I truly enjoyed helping out in the kitchen.

My "Final" Goodbye to P373K: As I've been happy with my Adorables graduating, I eventually had to graduate myself and I wasn't sure if I was that happy about it since I had to say goodbye to my job as a helper. Just like my Adorables, it was time for me to step into the next chapter in my life, but I was going to miss working at the Northside Center for Child Development.

College Life During Pandemic

I'm currently working on my future career goals while attending [AHRC New York City's Melissa Riggio Higher Education](#)

see Matching on page 28

Six Steps for Greater Autism Inclusion in the Workplace

By Ashish Kaushal
Founder and CEO
Consciously Unbiased

Imagine you have an employee who excels at pattern recognition, thinks “outside of the box” and has extreme attention to detail. Yet, they might not enjoy making eye contact or be the best at reading social cues.

This was the case for one company’s new hire that I learned about during a recent episode of my podcast. This new employee was given the same onboarding document handed to the roughly 70,000 new hires at the global organization who came before him. He noticed a mistake in one of the steps, brought it to his manager’s attention and saved the company roughly 25,000 hours because it cut processing time by 50%. The new hire was brought on through the company’s neurodiversity program and is on the [autism spectrum](#), which is a broad range of conditions often tied to challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. Each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges.

Those on the spectrum often struggle with “[social communication and interactions](#),” according to the Society for Human Resource Management. That being said, many people on the spectrum have also been shown to have increased attention to



Ashish Kaushal

detail, excel at repetitive tasks such as coding and analytics, and are loyal employees with low turnover rates.

Often our differences can also be our greatest strengths. If everyone at the table thought the same, we would not be necessary. Climate activist Greta Thunberg, who is on the autism spectrum and has Asperger’s syndrome, [tweeted](#) she is “sometimes a bit different from the norm. And - given the right circumstances - being different is a superpower.”

Reuters reported that [80% of people](#) on the autism spectrum globally are either unemployed or “severely underemployed.” With an estimated [50,000 people](#) on the spectrum entering adulthood every year, this is a huge [untapped talent pool](#).

There are many things businesses can do to support people with autism in the workplace, and steps taken should be customized to the individual and the company. To get started, here are some general steps for companies to create a more inclusive culture for people with autism - and tap into the strengths people on the spectrum can bring to the workplace.

Raise Awareness - To start, employers should have a good understanding of what autism is and what it looks like in the workplace. It’s important to communicate why hiring workers on the spectrum fits with your company’s values, such as greater inclusion, and also the benefits to company culture, such as being a catalyst for creating clear processes, increasing communication skills and boosting innovation. Such training is key for managers and teams to understand the mission.

Get Executive Sponsorship - In order for a program to be successful, it’s key to have support from the top down, assign program leaders, and build partnerships with your human resources, diversity and inclusion, and legal teams. The [Autism @ Work Play-](#)

[book](#) is a helpful, step-by-step guide for getting started.

Look for Talent in the Right Places - To find candidates, build relationships with universities and colleges that have autism-related programs, work-readiness programs and job fairs. Also, tap into your marketing team and think about how you could update your social media messaging to raise visibility and interest in finding talent who may be on the spectrum.

Furthermore, keep in mind that many people on the spectrum might not make it through the interview process because it’s not designed for them; they might not apply for a job in the first place - even if they are highly qualified - because they may read job descriptions very literally and opt out if they don’t meet every point in the description. That’s why when posting these job descriptions, it’s important to use clear and concise language and distinguish between what are “must-have” skills and experiences and what’s simply “nice to have.”

Rethink Your Interview Process - People on the spectrum might not be best at showing their strengths and skill sets through traditional job interviews. Ernst & Young, for example, created a different approach when interviewing candidates on the spectrum by engaging them in a week-long

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of charting for a mental health technician. When therapists, researchers, and employers alike are able to see special interests as avenues for meaningful engagement and successful participation in job tasks, they better serve and reap the strengths of neurodiverse individuals.

Sharon Eva is a pediatric occupational therapist currently working in Waco, Texas. She is passionate about serving the neurodiverse population and is pursuing her PhD in occupational therapy at Nova Southeastern University. Please feel free to contact her with any questions or comments at: Sharonrachelthomas@gmail.com

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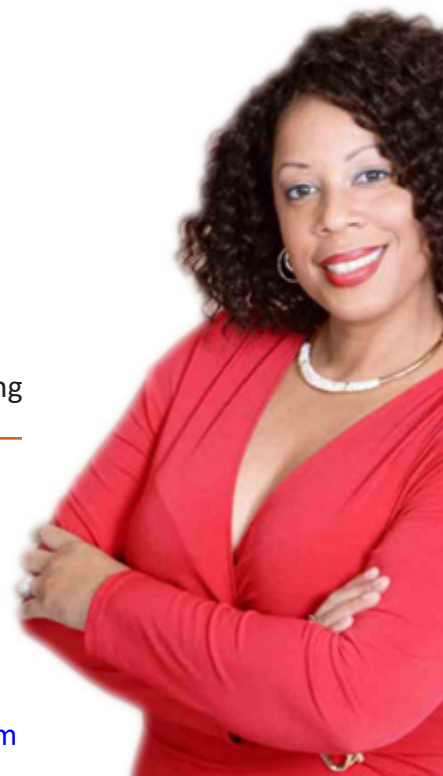
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Networking for Good

By Lesli Cattan, LCSW
and Marjorie Madfis, MBA
Yes She Can

Most people find employment opportunities through a network of people they know, and it is well documented that professional networking is an important investment in time to begin and grow one's career (Augustine, Top Resume). In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that "85% of jobs are filled by networking making it a critical skill to develop on the road to employment."

Networking allows people to establish and nurture long-term mutually beneficial relationships, learn about career options and developments, guide skill acquisition and development, maintain an awareness of changes in a particular industry and potentially lead to job opportunities (McIntyre, 2020).

Even in the best of circumstances, for a person with significant confidence and ability to articulate one's thoughts and respond appropriately to social cues and nuances, networking can be challenging. For adults on the autism spectrum, networking is counter-intuitive and extremely challenging. By definition, individuals diagnosed with autism are likely to be challenged by social communication and have difficulty understanding the social cues that influence day-to-day interactions.



Lesli Cattan, LCSW

Networking requires actively listening to another person and then responding spontaneously to develop rapport. The art of networking is one of the harder skills to achieve, yet its value is undisputed and a skill worth developing amongst job seekers with autism. We know that adults with autism specifically are a disability population that has an extremely low rate of employment (Roux et al., 2015) and therefore, we implemented a curriculum to address the multiple challenges of job acquisition.



Marjorie Madfis, MBA

Our professional team at [Yes She Can](#) developed a curriculum to teach networking skills that assumed some level of success along with a willingness to provide significant preparation and reasonable dignity of risk. Preparing job candidates with autism for networking opportunities is multi-layered and cannot be rushed.

The thorough preparation included a series of mini workshops over the course of months that could be replicated in a variety of settings and provide the tools necessary for people with autism to succeed in their

networking efforts.

Workshops were offered in multiple week chunks, scaffolding skills leading to networking opportunities. The workshops were broken down into the following topics:

- Exercises to enhance self-awareness of vocational preferences and interests including strengths, likes and dislikes, environmental setting awareness, need for direction, work hours and modes of available transportation
- Develop an understanding of the concept of active listening and moving from a prepared script to responding to an unexpected suggestion or information
- Managing one's own anxiety via practice of skills in small group settings and in one-on-one settings
- Job exploration using videos and guest speakers from a variety of career avenues to help increase awareness of potential job possibilities
- Understanding the types of resumes used and completing a current resume
- Establishing an account that accurately reflected each person's strengths, work and volunteer experiences, job interests

see [Networking on page 31](#)

A Bridge to Employment

By Ruth Eren, EdD and
Laura H. DiGalbo, MEd

As a student's remaining time in high school dwindles down to a year or two, school district personnel are challenged to meet the expectations of both students and parents regarding life after high school. Post-secondary education transition brings its own set of challenges while employment opportunities for those not going on to further educational programs involve quite another set of more complex and uncharted demands and expectations.

Although many districts provide work experience programs in a student's final year, the shift from school work experience programs to employment is quite dramatic. Some parents have described it as falling off a cliff and are left to wonder if a parachute will open in the form of an employment opportunity. Many parents fear, what many of us know from research, that many individuals with autism will remain highly dependent upon their families well into adulthood (Howlin, p.112). It is a seismic shift from school programs to employment.

School programs for persons with disabilities is an entitlement with services, supports and due process required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Employment, unlike education, is guided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that is civil



Ruth Eren, EdD

rights legislation providing safeguards for persons with disabilities in the areas of employment, housing, and transportation among others.

As consultants to programs that are faced with this seismic shift, the authors have identified seven common transition issues that have confused and frustrated parents. These issues, if misunderstood or not fully explained, often create misunderstanding and communication issues between parents, their adult son or daughter, potential employers and adult providers of vocational services. Although the seven issues are not based on a formal



Laura H. DiGalbo, MEd

research project, the authors believe in their critical importance through their active consultation and interaction with the many parties involved with the transition process. The authors strongly believe if the seven issues are fully understood by all parties involved, a bridge between the education environment and the employment environment can be constructed allowing the transition from school to employment to be a much smoother (yet still challenging), process! The following is brief list of the seven issues that demonstrate the shift between the two worlds the young adult is moving from and to:

Issue #1: Transition Focus vs. On Demand Environment

Education Environment - Transition Focus
Students are instructed in programs that are individualized. Instruction is tailored to meet their learning style, educational, and environmental needs.

Employment Environment - On Demand Environment

Employees are expected to execute duties when instructed to do so, to the best of their abilities, with or without accommodations.

Issue #2: Development of Life Skills vs. Execution of Job Requirements

Education Environment - Development of Life Skills

School curriculum is still very much focused on instruction in independent living skills, social communication competencies and the development of self-determination. Employment Environment - Execution of Job Requirements

Employment is solely about getting the job done correctly and efficiently, with or without accommodations.

Issue #3: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) vs. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Education Environment - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with disabilities law is a law of entitlement that ensures students with

see [Bridge on page 27](#)

Self-Advocacy and Successful Onboarding and Maintenance of Employment

By Casey Schmalacker, BA
and Alissa Cappelleri, MAT
New Frontiers Executive Function Coaching

The topic of employment struggles for those on the Autism Spectrum tends to focus on gaining meaningful work opportunities, while the conversation needs to continue by looking at sustaining employment. In a 2018 study, only 14.3% of the sample sustained employment for a period longer than 18 months (Chan et al., 2018). There can be many reasons why employment is short lived. One focus area should be how language deficits characteristic in those with ASD highlights challenges with a “typical” onboarding/hiring process. Individuals can take ownership of their onboarding process to ensure a smooth transition into a new role, while setting up sustained employment.

The current state of onboarding is lacking. According to a 2017 Gallup poll, 88% of organizations’ onboarding processes are not designed well (Gallup, 2017). Most organizations (58%) center their onboarding programs around processes and paperwork, and 25% of companies say that their onboarding program doesn’t include training (Bauman, 2018). Further, 60% of companies don’t set clear expectations in terms of goals for new hires (Bauman, 2018). Looking at these statistics helps one



Casey Schmalacker, BA

understand that the focus of onboarding employees is not on setting them up for success. If the goal is to sustain employment, it is the prerogative of those being hired to advocate for an onboarding period that complements their strengths and mitigates their challenges.

Autism Spectrum Disorders are characterized by “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction” (APA, 2013). Some of this is the result of weaknesses with figurative language (Kalandadze et. al., 2018). Individuals with



Alissa Cappelleri, MAT

ASDs benefit from explicit language when learning new tasks (Muller, et al., 2008). Typical onboarding is not guaranteed to be developed with respect to neurodiversity. Individuals seeking employment should utilize self-advocacy and communication strategies to make the onboarding process as successful as possible.

The onboarding process must be evaluated for potential roadblocks for those with ASDs. Guidelines may be presented that leave room for interpretation and further clarification in order for those with ASD to

make meaning. In order to ensure that an individual can meet expectations, self-advocacy and individualization will be essential. The following strategies and questions to ask can enable one to advocate for themselves and gather the necessary information to rise to the occasion of a new position.

Clarifying What is Communicated

How can we define expectations?

The employer’s traditional onboarding process should be reviewed with the individual and meaningful checks for understanding are to be incorporated. Any opportunity for the new employee to put an expectation in their own words and confirm comprehension is valuable. Assumptions of clarity in terms of language use allow for gaps and may lead to a mismatch regarding what an employer was looking for and the employee’s work production. Having a shared language framework that all agree upon minimizes this potential outcome and can sustain employment. By using questions, Individuals should compile a list of expectations to their understanding and present them for review.

What does success look like in this job position?

Expectations may be outlined in the job description. However, what is presented on

see Onboarding on page 30

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process known as “**SuperWeek**,” which gauges how potential employees work by giving them problems to solve in a team setting over the course of one week with feedback incorporated throughout. Rather than traditionally interviewing candidates with autism, your organization can consider a series of assessments or participation in a group project to gauge skills and potential fit.

Customize Onboarding - Work within your mainstream HR processes, but add specifics geared toward employees with autism and customize the onboarding process. Bring on a job coach who specializes in working with people with autism to help optimize their success. Put a support circle in place to help mentor the new hire about workplace expectations such as dress code, roles and expectations, and social norms.

Make Accommodations - Every person is different; make accommodations to help new hires with autism be successful. For

example, if noise or light sensitivity are an issue, provide noise-canceling headphones or dim the lights. If making eye contact is uncomfortable, mirror the new hire and don’t look directly into their eyes. Provide updates about changes in tasks well in advance and offer meeting notes to help them prepare beforehand. Offer regular, concise feedback.

We might overlook candidates whose social skills don’t shine in an interview or who we perceive as not being a “culture fit.” We might not have diversified talent pools for tapping into potential hires with autism. But this can lead to missing out on trustworthy and loyal employees who are creative problem solvers. Let’s strive to create workplaces where people’s differences are truly valued, and everyone can show up to work being who they are.

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Ashish Kaushal is Founder and CEO of [Consciously Unbiased](#), an organization helping companies meet their diversity and inclusion goals.



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AUTISM SPECTRUM NEWS DESK

Early Screening Tool Leads to Earlier Diagnosis and Treatment for Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Scott LaFee
UC San Diego Health

Since it debuted in 2011, the [Get SET Early](#) program, which provides pediatricians and parents with a relatively simple process to screen for indicators of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children as young as age 1, has steadily grown in use and validation. Early screening and identification of ASD has been linked to more effective treatment.

A new study, published in the April 26, 2021 issue of the [Journal of Pediatrics](#) by researchers at University of California San Diego School of Medicine, further bolsters these findings.

Led by Karen Pierce, PhD, a professor in the Department of Neurosciences who with colleagues created the Get SET Early program, researchers at the [UC San Diego Autism Center of Excellence \(ACE\)](#) assembled a network of 203 pediatricians in the San Diego region who conducted systematic screenings of 59,411 infants or toddlers at their 12-, 18- and 24-month check-ups.

Parents completed a validated questionnaire about their child's use of eye contact, words, gestures and other forms of age-appropriate communication, using either a paper form or an iPad. The final question on the screening tool: "Do you have any concerns about your child's development?" (Yes or No).



Karen Pierce, PhD

Digital screens automatically scored patients as pass or fail. Pediatricians were asked to indicate whether they were referring toddlers who failed a screening for further evaluation and if not, why not.

Overall, 897 children failed the initial screening and received further evaluation at ACE. Within this cohort, 403 received a subsequent diagnosis of ASD. Approximately 60 percent of these children were assessed at their 12-month well baby visits,

and received a comprehensive evaluation, diagnosis and treatment referral by age 15 months.

"There is extensive evidence that early therapy can have a positive impact on the developing brain," said Pierce, who is co-director of ACE. "The opportunity to diagnose and thus begin treatment for autism around a child's first birthday has enormous potential to change outcomes for children affected with the disorder. These toddlers, as part of the Get SET Early program began treatment roughly three years earlier than the national average of 52 months."

But the study also revealed some surprising findings: Participating pediatricians referred only 39 percent of toddlers who had failed a screening for additional evaluation.

"Data from the iPads indicated the lack of referral follow-through was because pediatricians thought that the results of the screen were wrong," said Pierce. "But if a parent noted that they were concerned by checking 'yes' on the last question, the referral rate increased to 70 percent."

"These findings underscore the importance of parent participation and input when seeking to detect the earliest signs of ASD or other development delays in young children. If you are a parent and have even minor concerns about how your child is developing, you must speak up. Don't wait. Your voice carries weight."

ASD is now estimated to affect one in every 54 children born in the United States. Multiple studies, including research conducted by Pierce and colleagues have found that simple parent checklists performed as early as a child's first birthday can identify symptoms of ASD. Early diagnoses have been found to be highly stable as early as 14 months.

Pierce said the Get SET Early program, which has expanded to other cities and states with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, can be adopted by any pediatric office, at virtually no cost.

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Scott LaFee is Director of Communications and Media Relations at UC San Diego Health.

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Funding for this research came, in part, from the National Institute of Mental Health (grant R01 MH104446).

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parent, therapist or teacher, guiding ASD individuals to learn new behaviors and develop new skills. MOVIA's Robot-Assisted Instruction (RAI) systems help children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and other special needs unlock the potential to learn and grow through their unique robotic technology. MOVIA Robotics builds systems to help these children remove barriers to learning, socializing and adapting, while facilitating a positive learning environment at school and at home by dynamically leading them through activities using evidence-based prompting and instructional design. I was astonished to observe how ASD individuals naturally connect effortlessly with the robot. It's as if the rapport is immediately established, a fundamental in effective therapy.

The second observation in working with the ASD population using RAI is that the skills ASD children develop naturally become generalized onto other situations and people. For example, as the robot and child practice a lesson on "How to Ask for Help," many children carry this behavior over to adults/teachers in their lives.



Lisa Lichtenstein

One of my favorite options I utilize with RAI is the ability to customize communication coming from the robot, as it interacts with my clients. With this modality I've been able to ask questions, through the robot, that previously would not elicit a response. When the robot communicates, the majority of the ASD children I've worked with consistently respond and initiate further communication. For

example, the robot asked one ASD adolescent what he wanted to do in the future, regarding playing the piano. His mother was amazed that he had a plan of forming a band, and had a name picked out for his band. Moreover, the adolescent was prolific in asking the robot questions about "himself" - "Why do you have an unusual name? How old are you?" In the years I've worked with this population, the curiosity and questions are not observed significantly toward other people as opposed to the robot. The strategy, in part, is to make communication comfortable and routine so that this behavior is generalized onto other people in the adolescent's life. The robot also encourages generalization of new skills.

At a public school in Los Angeles, I created a customized program where the robot taught moderate to severe Autistic children. These lessons included *Why and How to Wear a Mask*, *Washing Your Hands*, and *Practicing Social Distancing*, in preparation to returning to a hybrid in-person school schedule. To my happy amazement the children were "glued" to the robot, seemingly enjoying the delivery, the warmth, and the information.

I'm not a neuroscientist but I wonder if

there is a familiar and comfortable connection between the sophistication of the RAI and ASD individuals. In any case, I have observed how productive and joyous ASD children respond to RAI and I am excited to discover more about this population. For the first time, when the first conversation was in process between the robot and child, I felt honored to glimpse inside the beautiful, intelligent, and creative mind of an autistic child.

Lisa Lichtenstein has established a multi-faceted career as a psychotherapist practicing for over 20 years. She runs a psychotherapy private practice in Santa Monica, CA, is a Clinical Director in two special education schools in Los Angeles, and is the psychological expert for [MOVIA Robotics](#), focusing on the implementation of RAI for children with socio-emotional, behavioral, communication, and academic challenges. Lisa's impassioned career promotes people becoming healthier and happier, and her work with MOVIA promotes the use of assistive technology that expedites psychological and emotional growth and profound progress. (License: MFC39938 lisalichtenstein.com | Lisa-lich@me.com | (310) 980-2179)

How Practicing and Building Interview Skills Can Help Individuals with ASD Feel Less Overwhelmed

By Nancy Fraher
Program Coordinator for Project
SEARCH Autism Enhancement
The Arc Westchester

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 54 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (CDC, 2020). Since there is no evidence to suggest that the prevalence of ASD will decrease, the need for transitional services, especially those related to employment, has become even greater. Over the next decade, approximately half a million young people on the autism spectrum will transition to adulthood (Demer, 2018), and it is critical that they receive the supports and learn the skills needed in order to do this successfully.

At The Arc Westchester, our Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement Program (PSAE) is a one-year internship program targeted for young adults, ages 18 to 28, with ASD whose goal is competitive employment. PSAE uses the proven curriculum from the original Project SEARCH program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center that has been enhanced by NEXT for AUTISM and UNC TEACCH evidence-based practices in partnership with The Arc Westchester, New York-Pres-



Nancy Fraher

byterian Hospital, and New York-Presbyterian's Center for Autism and the Developing Brain.

For an individual with ASD, being employed means integration into a social network, contributing to society, making their own choices and decisions and being less reliant upon publicly funded programs (Roux et al, 2013). But for many individuals with ASD, finding and keeping a job can be difficult, with challenges including navigating the social dynamics of the

workplace, coping with sensory overload, organizing and completing tasks, and communicating with coworkers (Roux, Rast, Anderson and Shattuck, 2017). We have found that helping individuals learn the skills needed to be successful in the workplace starts with preparing them for the interview process.

Strong interview skills begin with basic communication skills, and this is something that should be an integral part of any employment training program curriculum. Individuals with ASD may have difficulties with some behaviors related to social skills including eye contact, engaging in reciprocal conversation and responding to another person's interactions, which can pose a challenge in the work environment (Hendricks, 2010). From day one, it is important to work with individuals on honing these skills, from making small talk in the hallways, to conversing with their peers and staff, to having phone conversations and virtual meetings. Individuals build upon this foundation throughout their training so when it comes time for a formal interview, they are comfortable with the interaction and have had a variety of experiences. It is important to maintain routine practice reviewing topics that are appropriate to discuss at work (sports, the weather, etc.) and what is not, including personal information.

Another tool we have found to be helpful is the creation of a slide presentation that allows participants to visually share more about themselves and the work and training they are doing throughout the program. This presentation uses photos and/or video clips of the individual working throughout the various phases of the program and descriptive captions explaining what they are doing. We have found that our interns with ASD sometimes struggle with open-ended or direct questions, and utilizing the slide presentation provides another avenue for discussion and takes a bit of the pressure off the situation. All of the information from the visual presentation is also included on their resume, which we help them write and update throughout the program.

If using a visual component like the above, it is important to give individuals the opportunity to practice presenting their story prior to any formal interview. This is also something that can be expanded on over time to help increase their confidence. Participants can start with presenting to a member of the staff, then their peers, then familiar faces who they do not interact with every day, but who they know, and so on. Gradually build out that circle, so that when it comes time for them to show the presentation to a potential employer, they

see Interview Skills on page 29

Safety from page 4

disability learns through the real-time example of watching another person perform the same task. This can also be the function of a job coach if the employee receives that type of support mentioned earlier within this article. Consult with local and state-based providers to learn more about regional support offerings.

While these recommendations are largely related to the function of Human Resources, they are steps which can limit the risks associated with managing an inclusive workforce. Supervision and clear responsibilities set the tone for an environment which is safe. In these environments, each person works within their hired expectations. When adhering to concrete job duties there is less risk than one would experience in a more subjective role where responsibilities shift or may be a bit gray. Supervision and mentorship which meet the employee's needs leave little risk for accident or injury. This is because there is always a helpful member of the team available to provide guidance and support from keeping the employee on task to recognizing if they are in a potentially hazardous situation.

The benefits of creating an inclusive

workplace environment can far exceed the risk when making minor changes to the traditional way that jobs function. These modifications are worth implementing. They lead to meaningful employment opportunities for people with Autism.

Heather Purcell has earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Community and Human Services. She is the chairperson for the Orange County Community Services board I/DD subcommittee with thirteen years of experience in the human service field. Irwin Siegel Agency (ISA) has been the leading Program Administrator for the Human and Social Service industry for decades. Members of the Risk Management Division from ISA come from a Social Service background, giving them an accurate perspective of the day-to-day challenges that provider agencies face when it comes to managing risk. For more information contact riskmanagement@siegelagency.com.

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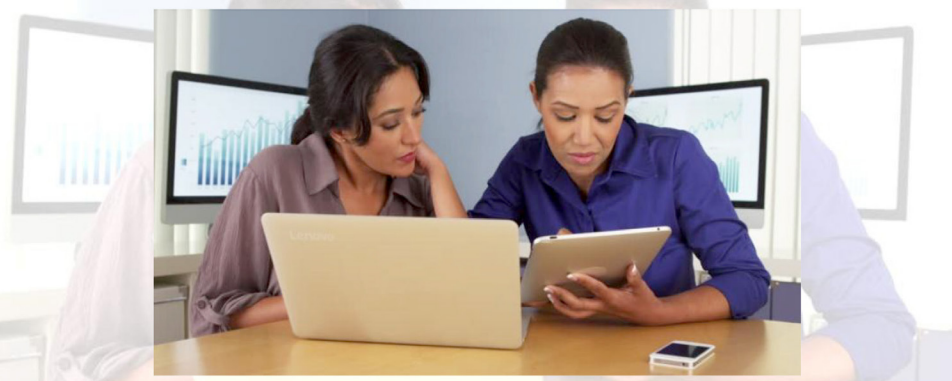
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Implementing Common Sense Practices to Improve the Psychological and Emotional Safety of Autistic Adults in the Workplace

By Heidi Stieglitz Ham, PhD
CEO and Founder
Spectrum Fusion

I hired five adults on the autism spectrum. Am I a hero? No. Do I have all of the answers? No. However, after years of actively listening to autistic adults describe their emotional struggles whilst they desperately tried to maintain employment in the traditional workplace, I am committed to taking their lessons on board and creating a productive, vibrant, psychologically and emotionally safe work environment at [Spectrum Fusion](#).

Employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals are bleak, especially for adults on the autism spectrum. Published studies in the United States, UK, Australia, and Canada all report high unemployment rates for adults on the autism spectrum. In 2012, Shattuck and colleagues published their findings that approximately 85% of autistic adults were unemployed. Although 35% of adults on the autism spectrum attend college, only 15% were employed, a much larger disparity than that found in the population at large. Moreover, such individuals were more likely to be underemployed, thus not contributing to their full level of capability (Shattuck et al., 2012). Roux et al. (2013) reported that merely



Spectrum Fusion Media team from left to right: Darren Logue (Production Assistant and Videographer), Rhys Griffin, (Visual Storyteller), and Philip Thomas (Lead Editor and Videographer)

53.4% of autistic adults ever held a paid job since graduating from high school.

Securing and sustaining employment continues to be the number one challenge facing autistic adults in 2021. It doesn't have to be this way. With a few common

sense practices, companies can create psychologically and emotionally safe workplace environments that will attract and retain adults on the autism spectrum so they can thrive, grow, and bring their talents to society.

Psychological Safety 101

We have all heard about companies who touted their "open-door" policies, encouraging their employees to candidly share their ideas or feelings only to have those same employers use the information against their employees at a later date. In organizational psychology, the most widely accepted definition of psychological safety was put forward by Edmondson (1999) as a shared belief by the employees as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal disclosure in the workplace. Psychological safety is the belief that one won't be humiliated or retaliated against for sharing ideas, questions, concerns, or even mistakes. [Google's Project Aristotle](#) research revealed that psychological safety was the most critical factor in highly productive teams. Recently, Yuwan and Keller (2021) published their findings that project teams in R&D perform better and stay longer. This makes perfect sense. Our team at Spectrum Fusion report that they feel safe to share without fear of retribution.

Resilience and Stamina

Adults on the autism spectrum report suffering from trauma and PTSD after

see Common Sense on [page 35](#)

Holistic from [page 6](#)

needs. Employees who can work in a way that allows them to use their strengths are happier, less stressed, and more confident. Researchers Auston and Pisano have noted since 2017 that there is an ongoing effort to recognize and celebrate the strengths of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. Managers should continue to maximize strengths and minimize deficits to set autistic and other neurodivergent employees - and all employees for that matter - up for success.

It's been long understood that talented employees with a high workload and little autonomy encounter difficulty in their learning and development, resulting in stress (Ruyssveldt and Dijke, 2011). These employees should create a plan of action with their manager if they feel swamped, according to this research. Employers can tailor environments for neurodiversity or individual differences in productivity and learning styles, allowing all employees to become more autonomous, especially when under a heavy workload. As someone with first-hand experience of social anxiety related to speaking, I benefitted from productivity enhancements like allowing me to write out my thoughts instead of verbalizing them in group discussions.

Integrating Wellness Into Business Practices

In addition to formally communicating wellness practices to employees, it's also important for employers to instill these practices in workgroups and make wellness a part of the daily routine of the workplace.

For example, managers can practice meditation, mindfulness, and stress resilience, share their knowledge with their direct reports and make these activities available during team meetings. Another technique identified in the 2010 piece "The Way We're Working Isn't Working" is the practice of managers encouraging their direct reports to take a short break after 90 minutes of busy work to increase their focus by 30%. Another useful technique is scheduling blocks of time during the work week for direct reports to perform deep work to be absorbed in what they are doing, solve complex challenges, gain mastery, and deliver signature solutions (Miller et al., 2018). Switching between tasks quickly without having much time to think things over can deplete creative energy and compromise mental health (Newport, 2016). Organizations that infuse mental wellness into their DNA will always have an immediate positive effect on current and incoming employees.

One Final Note on Mental Well-Being

You may face a situation in which one of your employees struggles with severe mental-health difficulties. They may present a more pessimistic view of the future. At work they may suddenly show less enthusiasm or initiative. When someone is diagnosed with a disorder such as major depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia, they might worry about telling their employer. As a manager, you can educate yourself on mental health, recognize symptoms and signs as cues to talk with an employee about their well-being, ask them open-ended questions and actively listen to

their responses (Hasson and Butler, 2020). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers must provide reasonable accommodations to eligible individuals, including those with a diagnosed mental-health disorder.

Employers have the power to enhance the mental well-being of all employees. By building a work environment that promotes psychological safety, acknowledges employees' strengths and autonomy, and builds wellness practices into the workday, they can create a foundation for strong mental health and growth.

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Ensuring Equal Access to Employment Opportunities for Adults with Autism Requires Bold Legislative Initiative

By Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara
Chair of the New York State
Assembly’s Sub-Committee on
Autism Spectrum Disorders

In the wake of an unprecedented year, many of us are all keenly aware of the difficulties that can come with finding and keeping a steady, good-paying job. However, for adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other developmental disability, this already-difficult endeavor can be further complicated by a host of additional barriers. People with disabilities serve an essential role in our workforce and deserve a fair chance to succeed. That’s why, in honor of this year’s New York State Assembly Legislative Disabilities Awareness Day, I helped passed a legislative package designed to remove these barriers to employment so all New Yorkers can follow their dreams and lead a fulfilling life.

Those with disabilities are often overlooked for employment opportunities due to employers’ false assumptions that they will be unable to complete their duties adequately. According to a number of studies and data sets, adults with autism are unemployed at a rate of 75-85%. Even those who achieved a college degree find themselves to be underemployed or unemployed at an



New York State Assemblyman
Angelo Santabarbara

alarmingly higher rate than their peers.¹ This is a sad reality that prevents capable individuals from entering the workforce. Adults living with a disability deserve the same opportunities to support and provide for themselves and their families just like anyone else.

To help alleviate this barrier, we need

more than a culture of awareness, but we need acceptance and incentives to get us there. The New York State Assembly recently passed a bill establishing a tax credit ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 for small businesses that employ people with disabilities (A.3960 of 2021). This credit would be available for companies with fewer than 100 employees that employ a disabled person for at least 6 months for a minimum of 35 hours a week.²

To further combat discriminatory employment practices, I have introduced a bill that would seek to award 5% of state contracts to businesses where 15% of the employees are individuals with disabilities (A.2593). The bill would involve creating a statewide study to determine whether there is a disparity between the number of qualified businesses able to perform state contracts and the numbers actually engaged and determine any changes needed.³

Another bill passed would ensure the rights of state employees to sue New York State for damages due to violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (A.7121). This will not only give further agency to adults with disabilities, but will also deter employers from using discriminatory hiring and workplace practices.⁴

In addition, this the legislative package

included a measure aimed at promoting overall accessibility in the day-to-day lives of individuals with disabilities like re-establishing the Office of the Advocate for People with Disabilities to help those with disabilities receive services and support in order to enable them to make informed choices and decisions (A.3130).⁵

Providing substantive change for the thousands of adults with autism requires a great deal more on our part. Aside from amending portions of our law to encourage fair and fulfilling employment opportunities, we need to support the countless organizations and nonprofits that have the connections and framework in place to provide people with autism and their families all the resources they need to succeed. In this year’s New York State budget, I’m proud that my work with that of local advocates ensured important funding for the Autism Society of the Greater Capital Region to support the [Gig Works program](#). Gig Works is an innovative program that fosters connections between employers and people with autism all the while creating a support system to help these individuals navigate the workforce.⁶

Whether an individual is searching for meaningful employment or a training program, we must do everything we can to

see [Equal Access on page 26](#)

Job Search from page 1

from playing video games, collecting rare coins, eating a certain type of candy, or simply sitting among nature. Now make a list of everything you don’t enjoy. Maybe it’s getting up early in the morning, washing the dishes after dinner, or, specific to some autistic individuals, avoiding crowded places with a lot of noise. Let your mind run; just keep writing it all out until you have a sizable list of pros and cons.

Already you may begin to discover some possible jobs to embrace or avoid. My above scenario means that I enjoy technology and thrive on competition; however, I would prefer to stay in my own space away from people. I have a very high attention to detail and a passion for certain parts of history. I’m also fascinated by the way in which things are made or constructed. I would prefer to find a job with flexible hours or at least that would allow me to work remotely. Based on these preliminary conclusions, I definitely do not want to work in a restaurant or dining hall!

Jobs or professions I might like (be broad in your exploration):

- Game designer (my “dream” job)
- Computer technician, IT specialist or Webmaster/designer
- Museum or art gallery guide/docent
- Archeology
- [Numismatic Jobs](#) (coin related): Who thought you could have a career in coins? Just one of many examples of jobs that



Michael Giorgio

exist but are not well known. There is gold to mine in your special interests!

- Food science or manufacturing
- Ecology, Environment Science
- Working in a National Park or Nature Preserve

Some of the above jobs may require additional education, while others are possible entry level opportunities that can grow in responsibility. Some jobs may even pay for you to go back to school. Internships while in school can sometimes lead to jobs as well and are a most effective way to enter a competitive industry or company -

this is especially true with creative industries such as design.

The Resume and Cover Letter as Your Self-Marketing Tool

Your resume is your calling card. This and your cover letter will give the viewer their first impression of you, so maximize your skills and sell what you do best. This is of paramount importance if you have limited professional experience. Your task is to craft your skillset into a marketable example of how you will be an asset to a given organization. To the point: get the hiring manager to “fall in love” with you. Not literally, but make them want you for that job as the perfect candidate.

You can create impact with virtually any set of responsibilities by quantifying accomplishments and using strong active verbs to make your skills applicable to any number of potential jobs, thus allowing the reader to draw parallels to what they are seeking. Perhaps you worked in a super-market as a cashier or stock clerk:

- **Managed over \$25,000** per week and accurately **reconciled** the daily cash drawer (*skills = attention to detail with no mistakes and ability to handle large amounts of money responsibly*)
- **Interfaced with 200** customers per week in a high production environment (*skills = working with people in a fast-paced setting and the ability to handle a large volume of products in a short amount of time*)
- **Delivered** superior service and **resolved** customer and product issues for over

50 customers per week. (*skills = adept at problem solving, working well under pressure, ability to deal with a wide range of people in difficult situations, commitment to and satisfaction in helping others, promoting a positive image of the store and being a brand ambassador, and the list goes on...*)

- **Reviewed 125** incoming weekly stock deliveries for accuracy (*high attention to detail, reduced errors*)
- **Organized** stock shelves and unpacked **2** pallets containing **35** large product boxes nightly for visual store display (*ability to visually organize and complete a task in a defined amount of time*)

Quick tips for writing a resume that gets noticed:

- Your profile/objective should clearly state what you want in relation to the job application and how your accomplishments will match that particular position. NOTE: you can have a series of resumes to suit different types of jobs: one for computer work, another for museums, etc. **Overall, be sure to adapt your profile/objective to the job.** Moreover, avoid appearing as a “jack-of-all-trades.” Employers are looking for targeted experience, so that is what you need to show them.

Example: Seeking a growth-oriented position as a museum tour guide utilizing my expertise in historical coins.

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The Connection Between Transportation Access and Future Employment

By Andrew Arboe
Director of Community Outreach
Planning Across the Spectrum

I have given countless driving seminars, and in all of them I talk about the importance of discussing the impact of driving and transportation on employment. It is my belief that potential employment opportunities must always be discussed with the individual's transportation options in mind. Available transportation is important in life as it increases both social and employment related opportunities, both of which increase the overall freedom and independence a person can have.

As someone who works with the autistic community, and is autistic myself, I understand that transportation options are often limited, but I also understand the potential consequences of this. If someone has limited transportation options, their opportunities become much more limited by their location. One of the many results of this is that employment becomes much harder to find. I recall hearing a story back in my community college days. It was about someone who graduated but was finding their employment search much more difficult than expected, and for an unexpected reason. This person didn't have a license, and apparently it was really standing in their way of finding a job. The reason this story still sticks is that this person was also part of the disability specialist program, the same program I was enrolled in. It made me realize how crucial it was to consider one's transportation options throughout life, especially for myself and others in similar positions in life.

I started thinking more about how transportation was related to freedom and independence, and I realized many important things. Possibly most importantly, I realized that the career path someone chooses may influence, or even determine, the type of transportation one may have to use. Certain jobs require people to be able to drive, but others require less expected transportation requirements, like taking the train, or the subway, or the bus. Navigating these different transportation options, and how they relate to your chosen career path, can be scary, and you may not know where to start if you are currently looking to plan for your future. I am here to help though by providing pointers and proactive ideas that will help get you started on the right foot!



Andrew Arboe

Consider Your Career Path

Before transportation is even discussed regarding employment, it is important to consider what field of work you are interested in. What career path you choose often heavily influences what transportation method you are mostly likely to use for your future jobs. Researching job listings can help you get an idea of the licensing requirements and required transportation. Some listings may require you to drive a certain number of miles for the job while some may allow you to work at home a certain amount of the time. Positions such as being bus driver will likely require additional licenses.

Sometimes a job is simply much more difficult without access to certain types of transportation. To provide a personal example from my own journey, working in the autism field heavily influenced me to get a driver's license as I saw numerous mentoring positions that I had to drive to. Research can help you effectively prepare for your career path, in general and regarding transportation requirements. Knowing what is needed for the future can give you an idea of the steps you need to start taking now.

Consider Alternative Transportation Options

As you are researching job positions, it is also important to investigate non-driving transportation options in the area. Where you or a potential job are located can also influence your choices on potential transportation methods. The available options vary from town to town and coun-

ty to county, with some having a variety of choices and others having very little to offer. A common example of this is that suburban areas often have public bus stops and/or active Uber drivers while rural areas often lack both. As you research potential employment options, research the area's transportation options as well. Here is a list of a few nondriving methods of transportation that are valuable to consider:

- Public transportation (buses, trains, subways)
- Ubers or other similar services such as Lyft
- Nearby friends who drive
- Walking or biking (if there are sidewalks in the area)

Consider if Learning to Drive Is Right for You

Now that you have a lot of crucial information, it's time to make an informed decision on if learning to drive is right for you, especially at this point in your life. It's important to mention that this is an ongoing process, and you might not be ready to learn now, but may be later in life. The point of getting the full picture, including understanding alternative transportation options, is to take the pressure off. However, as discussed, for many driving can create new and valuable employment opportunities. If you do want to learn to drive, or even are just curious to try it out and see if it is something you feel comfortable following through with, there are great direct steps you can take.

Identify Useful Resources Online and in Your Area

This may or may not be challenging to find, considering each state is very different with resources. Driving school can be a great first step for many potential drivers, but for other disabled drivers such as myself, it gets a little more complicated. Some states may have adaptive driving schools or driving rehabilitation programs that work with individuals with various disabilities, while others do not.

A few years ago, as I was becoming more active in the disabled community, everyone talked about the public transportation and never about driving. There was only one driving school that had adaptive

driving services. There was also only one place that provided clinical assessments, which evaluates an individual's driving ability. As I researched other services nationwide for my online consultations, I found some additional resources that can provide people with several ideas when it comes to finding and managing transportation options. Here are some services to look into for your state:

- [Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists \(ADED\)](#) - They have a member directory for all 50 states.
- Search for "adaptive driving schools" online.
- Search for articles on the topic by both autistic and non-autistic voices who have experience with disabled driving.

Build Your Roadmap

Transportation should never be left in the dark during discussions about future or potential employment. It can make all the difference. It is also important to begin discussions about transportation and different transportation methods early on in life. If possible, promote these talks with those around you who are raising disabled children.

It's true that there is no one roadmap to adulthood, but that ambiguousness can be scary at times. We all need to be encouraged to explore what our own roadmap is going to be like by understanding our own needs and the resources and services we have access to. In my experience, I wish I had more discussions about transportation growing up, especially before I graduated school. I missed out and I had to learn a lot very quickly. But by building my roadmap on informed decisions and research, I was able to succeed far beyond I ever expected.

Whatever choices you make, they should be informed to effectively forge your own roadmap. For many that includes driving, for many it includes more public transportation-centered methods of travel. By discussing transportation when talking about future or potential employment opportunities, you set yourself up for success, and for a more free and independent life.

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ensure New Yorkers with disabilities receive fair and equal treatment. Individuals with disabilities make up a significant portion of our workforce, and they deserve the same opportunities and protections granted to all workers. I'm confident that by using practical policy initiatives like those we've established here in New York State, we

are developing a stronger framework for a more fair and inclusive society.

As the chair of the New York State Assembly Subcommittee on Autism Spectrum Disorders, I welcome any and all questions and concerns readers may have. Please feel free to contact my office at 518-382-2941 or send me an email at Santabarbara.A@nyassembly.gov. You can also find more information on my website at www.nyassembly.gov/Santabarbara.

[nyassembly.gov/Santabarbara](http://www.nyassembly.gov/Santabarbara).

Footnotes

1. www.nacweb.org/career-development/special-populations/autism-spectrum-disorders-on-the-rise/
2. <https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?bn=A03960&term=2021>

3. <https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?bn=A02593&term=2021>

4. <https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?term=2021&bn=A07121>

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6. www.asgcr.org/gig-works/

Autistics and Employment: Far Too Many Rivers to Cross

By Karl Wittig, PE
Advisory Board Chair
Aspies For Social Success (AFSS)

For as long as I have known about autism, I have heard reports that autistics have the highest unemployment rate among all disability groups - or, for that matter, just about any demographic. Even at the time of my own diagnosis (late 2000), by which such milder variants as Asperger Syndrome had been recognized, official rates were still awfully close to 100%. As public awareness improved during subsequent years, the numbers gradually went down, but nevertheless remained alarmingly high. This reduction was almost certainly due to expansion of diagnostic criteria in the DSM-IV (1994) and the likelihood that many less-impaired autistics managed to find employment. In any case, I have always believed that these numbers are much higher than the actual rates, and that many undiagnosed autistics have long been employed in a variety of occupations (as was the case with me).

Whatever the real unemployment rate among autistics might ultimately be, there can be no question that a highly disproportionate percentage of the autistic population has serious difficulties finding employment. Along with the many studies that have established this, I have first-hand



Karl Wittig, PE

knowledge of the situation from attending and facilitating Aspie support groups for over 20 years, in addition to learning from books, articles, and presentations during those years. What has always struck me most is the observation that, for just about every person on the spectrum I have encountered who lost a job, the reason never had to do with incompetence, malfeasance (e.g., stealing), negligence, or absenteeism (the more common reasons why people

are terminated), and always involved inappropriate behavior (sometimes a single incident), doing or saying things that were not well received, breaking rules that were never formally stated ("hidden curriculum" violations), or more generally interpersonal, social, or political issues. In fact, the only exception that I recall involved a "door-to-door" salesperson - an occupation that requires the ability to "read" potential customers and persuade them to buy products that they neither needed nor wanted - hardly the ideal job for an autistic with limited nonverbal communication and theory-of-mind skills.

A common story (one that I have heard numerous times) involves someone being let go because it was "just not working out," in spite of previously receiving favorable performance evaluations, without being given an explicit reason for the termination (this is perfectly legal in "employment at will" states); clearly the real reason involved something apart from the quality of their work or adherence to workplace regulations. Sadly, by not being told the real reason (which they could not figure out for themselves), they were not able to learn what their mistakes were and thereby avoid repeating them.

Things Go From Bad to Worse

The first evidence of change in employer priorities that I noticed was around

1991, when some job advertisements began the practice of concluding lists of desired qualifications with such phrases as "strong interpersonal and communications skills required." Interestingly, this was at least three years prior to the publication of DSM-IV, so that less-severe variants of autism were not even recognized yet. Apparently, human resource managers, who had never heard of the autism spectrum, were somehow familiar enough with its deficits to know that they did not want to hire anybody who had them.

For me, this was just further confirmation of what I had personally experienced for many years. Although a few people (amazingly) assumed that I had gotten just about every job I ever applied for (presumably based on my skills and accomplishments), the reality is that, even though responses to resumes and cover letters were usually quite fast (they must have been impressed by my credentials), the subsequent interview almost never led to a job offer. The only exceptions to this were research and development laboratories (I am an electronics engineer) - an environment in which a significant portion of the staff was often considered "eccentric;" such institutions, at the time, offered among the best working environments for those with autistic challenges, so I consider myself fortunate to have found my way there.

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Bridge from page 20

disabilities be provided individualized programming and due process if a student does not demonstrate progress.

Employment Environment - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Civil rights legislation/ADA insures that "eligible" persons with disabilities are given equal access to employment with or without accommodations.

Issue #4: Manifestation Determination vs. Otherwise Qualified

Education Environment - Manifestation Determination

Under IDEA a student cannot be denied an education if his inappropriate behavior is a manifestation of his disability. A suitable educational program must be provided, and the behavior must be addressed with supports and additional services if necessary.

Employment Environment - Otherwise Qualified

Under ADA an employee must be able to meet the essential functions of the job, including behavioral expectations, with or without accommodations; to be considered qualified for the job or to remain on the job.

Issue #5: Parental Influence vs. Self-Determination Executed

Education Environment - Parental Influence

Up until the age of 18, a parent can accept and approve all services and programs offered. Once the student reaches 18, those rights belong to him unless the student is under guardianship of the parent. In that

case, parents continue to have a voice in their young adult's educational program.

Employment Environment - Self-Determination Executed

Parents do not have a voice in the employment environment unless the parent has been deemed guardian of the employee by the adult court. Employees must advocate for themselves.

Issue #6: Modifications vs. Accommodations

Education Environment - Modifications

Under IDEA modifications can be made to allow a student with a disability to be maintained in the general education setting with the curriculum modified to meet his instructional needs.

Employment Environment - Accommodations

Under the ADA employees may have disability related accommodations to the process of executing job tasks. Modifications of essential job tasks are not included in the Law.

Issue #7: Pre-Vocational Exploration/Training vs. Individualized/Customized Employment

Education Environment - Pre-Vocational Exploration/Training

In the school setting, pre-vocational training and sometimes career exploration in various jobs can occur. Often this includes group placements and the support of a vocational rehabilitation agency along with significant modifications on the job site.

Employment Environment - Individualized/Customized Employment

If exiting students with disabilities choose

to enroll or continue with vocational services, the provider will deliver supports only in individualized, competitive employment settings. No longer are group settings used for vocational skill development on the job site.

Conclusion

These seven issues have been identified by the authors, one of whom has extensive background and experience in special education, the other has over 30 years of experience in state agencies involved with employment for people with disabilities. Through their consultation work with programs for adults with disabilities who are seeking employment, and working as a team, these issues continued to surface as prominent challenges. The nature of the consultation allowed the authors the luxury of stepping back in order to look at the overall process involved when a person with disabilities transitions from the educational environment to the environment of employment. The expertise of the consultants allowed for collaboration and most importantly, direct communication between the system of school-based transition services and adult employment services.

There was a unique opportunity for the different philosophies and structure of each of the two environments to be discussed and more fully explained. This is not always possible in the transition process where the focus is on the student soon to be adult, entering the world of work. Process

can sometimes be overlooked. The authors are very grateful to have had this unusual opportunity to work together and share perspectives. The seven issues cited above are a direct result of this collaboration and will hopefully serve as a bridge that will help schools, parents, employers and most importantly, adults with disabilities, work toward a more effective transition from the education environment to the employment environment.

Ruth Eren, EdD, is Professor Emerita and Director (Retired) at the Center of Excellence on ASD at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, CT. Laura H. DiGalbo, MEd, is a Nationally Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). For more information, contact Dr. Eren at Erenr1@southernct.edu and Laura at ldgalbo@aol.com.

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Social Skills from page 18

During each session, the specific skill is broken down into concrete steps using visuals and the skill is practiced through role-plays, video self-modeling, and interactive games. By providing individuals with ASD specific strategies around social skills in the workplace and emotion regulation we hope to help individuals with ASD get hired and more importantly have successful long-term employment.

Workers with Autism Fitting In

AiCure, an artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics company that monitors patient behavior and enables remote patient engagement in clinical trials, recognizes the unique abilities of workers with autism. With the support of **AHRC New York City’s (AHRC NYC)** Employment and Business Services, six people on the spectrum are currently working full time at AiCure’s New York City headquarters.

Since 2018, Robert Press has worked on AiCure’s video review team. His job involves watching videos to see if patients have taken the proper dosage of medication. Press also analyzes videos either requested by studies or within the company to improve the patient engagement application. “What I like best is that I do feel like I’m contributing to a good cause and my work is appreciated,” he said.

Though he likes to keep to himself, he works on a team, where members are assigned videos to watch. Working at AiCure, “has given me the opportunity to improve on my socialization skills,” he said. “Through simple interaction in the office, the company messaging service, team/company meetings (both in-person and video), and planned group activities, I have opened more of myself than I would have normally.”

“Keeping employees connected and providing fun and social activities, which go beyond happy hour, is important to AiCure,” said Gabriella Hall, Video Review Supervisor. “We can respect that everyone will have their own working styles, but when we come together we can all share the same goals and help each other when times get tough.”

Andrew Kaen, who also secured his AiCure job with support from AHRC NYC, said he feels comfortable in his role as a senior video reviewer. He has been with the company since 2017. “There is no stress and the position fits my lifestyle,” he said. He appreciates AiCure’s focus on hiring people with autism for the video review team.

Kaen explained that he has struggled to find a job that matches his skill set. “Working at AiCure makes me feel confident that I can succeed,” he said, adding that he has learned he is capable of being in the workforce. “I have set an example for others on the autism spectrum that there is hope.”

Study: Full-Time Workers Find More Satisfaction

The recently released **Autism @ Work: New Insights on Effective Autism Employment Practices from a World-First Global Study**, found that full-time workers with autism are more satisfied with the work environment and organizational practices an employer provides than individuals on the spectrum who work part-time.¹⁶

Employees on the spectrum working at social enterprises (for-profit companies providing solutions to make a positive impact on society) were the most satisfied and secure in their positions, followed by private sector businesses, non-profit organizations and then government/education sector, the study found.

The decision to hire people with autism was tied to the design of the jobs, which would require repetitive tasks and very structured goals and processes to meet AiCure’s objectives, Hall said. “There was an interest in hiring a team which was aware of and particularly suited to keep up with these demands,” she added. “An initial round of testing showed that outsourcing the work returned sub-par results that needed to go through quality checks. Keeping the work internal, instead, with a team dedicated to the workflow meant that we got higher quality work, with a team that was confident in and proud of its contributions.”

For many years, AHRC NYC has assisted individuals with autism to find meaningful and successful careers in the world of work. AHRC NYC has heard repeatedly from employers that hiring people on the spectrum has made their supervisors better managers because they have had to learn how to support people with different learning and communication styles.

AiCure found that hiring people on the spectrum changed its corporate culture “by really grounding everyone to work with empathy,” Hall said. “We can appreciate that everyone might have different interests or have different ways of enjoying coming together as a group. Instead of assuming everyone will enjoy or appreciate the same things, we’ve put more thought into how we can provide for everyone, regardless of how comfortable they are to put themselves out there or interact independently.”

Hiring people on the spectrum promotes

a more inclusive environment making the overall staff feel good about their workplace. Everybody has different abilities, and it is a win-win to the business and community when neurodiverse individuals are included and achieve their career dreams. In other words, hiring people with autism is a sound business decision.

“Everyone is nice and (AiCure) is a welcoming workplace,” Press said. “I feel comfortable doing my job and therefore try giving my best.”

Michelle Gorenstein is a Clinical Psychologist and Director of Community Outreach of the Seaver Autism Center for Research and Treatment. She earned her Doctorate of Psychology in Clinical Psychology from Ferkauf Graduate School at Yeshiva University. She receives funding from UJA Federation of New York to help disseminate more effective social skills programs for children, adolescents, and adults to community centers across the tri-state area.

Michele Shapiro is an Assistant Director in the Employment and Business Services department at AHRC New York City. She earned her Masters in Social Work from New York University. She has worked at AHRC NYC for over 30 years, assisting individuals with different abilities to prepare for, obtain and maintain employment.

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Matching from page 18

Program at Kingsborough Community College. Thanks to the Assistant Transition Developer named Frank Laskowitz, I’ve completed an excellent resume which shall start things off for my career path. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, my career planning got ruined, but Mr. Laskowitz encouraged me to attend virtual career fairs to find any opportunities in remote work/internships. I didn’t find much, so I began searching in new ways.

Thanks to Professor Susan Carpenter and Professor Eric Conte, I found a remote internship working with a first-grade student as an assistant teacher which relates to my

career interest of wanting to work with children. I’ve updated my resume with this internship, and I’ve really enjoyed working with a child, even if it was remote via Zoom.

During the month of World Autism Awareness (which is April), Kingsborough Community College had a virtual recruitment week for students to interview with employers for work opportunities. I decided to try it out by arranging to meet with employers from the Quality Services for the Autism Community and SKIP (Sick Kids [Need] Involved People) of New York’s Community Center. Unfortunately, the employers were unable to attend, so I was advised to send them my resume and cover letters. After hearing back from

them, I didn’t get many results. However, I did enjoy my remote job interviews with them to prepare for future employment.

Future Career Goals

I’ve been trying to find new work experiences before I choose to settle into a real job, and it sometimes makes me miss my old job back at the childcare center. I’d prefer to be happy in a job even if it pays less than I’m hoping for - it will at least be the official job that I’ll end up having for my future. I plan to get a job with good hours that I would enjoy. I wouldn’t mind the hard work, especially if it involves my interests (children, trains, or even my project on au-

tism) so I can be happy in my work life.

Career of Interest (1) - Children: From my experience at a childcare center, I might like a job working with children so I can improve my skills as a helper. I would enjoy supporting young kids or serving food to them when they need it. I also wouldn’t mind an opportunity to work with autistic children to see if I can become a big help to them as a mentor, which is what I’m aiming for with my autism project.

Career of Interest (2) - Trains: I’ve enjoyed trains since I was little, so I might like

see Matching on page 35

Disclosing Autism During an Interview

By Mike Dierdorff
Autism Self-Advocate
Autism Society of Iowa

A question that is widely debated in the Autism community is whether a prospective employee should disclose during the interview process they are autistic (I use identity first language). Opinions vary on this topic. It is my opinion that the comfort level the interviewee has is a determining factor in disclosing.

Personally, I choose to disclose. When the interviewer asks to tell me a little bit about myself, that's when I choose to disclose. From my experiences interviewing (I'm 56), it puts me at ease. I have disclosed since 2016, and my disclosing definitely makes me feel more comfortable. The public as a whole is understanding autism more. When I first spoke to Talk To Me Technologies in Cedar Falls, IA, I had an idea as to what they did, and I disclosed at the first informal meeting. I sent several emails to them, telling them I was still interested in working for their company. In August 2017, I was unemployed, so I looked at their website to see what openings they had. There was an opening for a shipping/inventory clerk, which was something I had experience in. I didn't get the original job, but they created a new position in which I would disinfect AAC devices that came in from loans and devices that were in need of repair. I accepted their offer, and at the age of 56, this is the best job I've ever had.

Marie Ugorek, who is an employee of a church, says she disclosed during her interview. She was recently diagnosed (in



Mike Dierdorff

comparison, I was diagnosed at the age of four). She was open with the pastor and the lay people during the process. She also was involved in writing the description for the job, including the flexibility in which she needed before she was diagnosed. Her disclosing explained why she did things the way she did. She works with families with loved ones who have ADHD and are autistic, and one autistic parent. Her boss at the church has learned her insight as being autistic and having ADHD is seen as a valuable resource in planning events that are neurodivergent friendly, and not only does this benefit churches, but all businesses would benefit from having neurodiverse employees on their staff to provide viewpoints from an autistic's point of view.

Brian Johnson, who works at a small rural newspaper, also chose to disclose to his

current employer of several years. When he was working with the Vocational Rehab people several years ago, it was suggested to him that he disclose so businesses weren't surprised with any behaviors he may exhibit or any needs he may have. He had overheard a conversation between two women at a local television station (a worker at the station and the person who interviewed him), and one of them commented that it was an odd conversation. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he never heard back. Despite this setback, he feels it is best to disclose so there aren't any surprises down the road. He's hoping in the future that conversations about autism will become less awkward and it just becomes a normal part of himself. He realizes some members of society are a long way from being accepting to those who are autistic,

but it is his hope that everyone will be accepting of those on the spectrum. With his last two jobs, he has disclosed with no issues. He believes his strengths and challenges balance out, but a person not familiar with autism may not give that person a chance, which my honest opinion is most unfortunate. He believes in being upfront when being interviewed or you're going to have a tough working for that employer.

This is just a small sample of people I asked this question to. I'm sure there are other who do not disclose, and it's strictly a personal choice. I do believe that more people in personnel decision making are starting to understand what autism is and how it may affect them throughout the workday, and thusly, it may open up more avenues for autistic people in the future. Autism education needs to happen every single day. My goal is to see the unemployment rate within our community in line with the national average. Will it take lots of hard work? Absolutely it will. But business leaders and autistics need to work together to come up with solutions. Here's a quote from a former colleague of mine: "Be proactive, not reactive;" this has stuck with me for many years. I believe some day this can happen. It won't happen overnight, but we need to keep moving forward. Educate people in power about Autism. We as a community need to keep making progress.

Special thanks go out to Marie and Brian for contributing to this article. Your help is greatly appreciated, and I hope more autistics will have the courage to come forward. We must keep educating.

For more information, you can email Mike at mikediendorff1965@gmail.com.

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are as comfortable as possible.

When there is an opportunity for an individual with ASD to participate in an actual interview, there are several additional steps that can be done to help them prepare. It's imperative to practice for the formality of a one-on-one interview. While many employers are now conducting interviews over Zoom, it should be stressed that these should be treated the same as an in-person interview and go over what is appropriate to wear for the interview and how to conduct themselves in this virtual format, which may include having a neutral background, learning to mute and unmute their microphone, turning on their camera and refraining from distractions. We have found that many of the interns in our program are more relaxed in the virtual setting. Another great tip is to help job candidates prepare questions for the prospective employer about the job responsibilities and the company. This often impresses the interviewer and shows they are truly invested in the opportunity for employment at that particular business.

Helping individuals learn how to answer questions is also an important skill as they

are working towards an in-person interview. For example, if they do not know the answer to a question, let them know it is okay to say, "I don't know," but to follow that up with, "But I'll find out." This may alleviate some anxiety in the moment while indicating to the interviewer that the question and answer are important.

Another helpful practice is to partner with employers that will allow potential candidates to participate in a "working interview." This allows the employer to observe the candidate performing the job that they are interviewing for, while allowing the candidate to showcase how they have prepared for the role and their skills. We have found that this type of interview, when possible, has successfully positioned our interns for employment.

One of the most important things I have learned throughout my career is how critical it is to find the right fit for each individual candidate. While preparing them for an interview or a certain role can be similar, everyone has their strengths and something different to bring to the work environment. We work tirelessly with The Arc Westchester's Supported Employment Program to find the right fit for each intern

that completes our program. Finding that right match is so important – that first job may not always be a forever job, but every person deserves to be in a role where they can use their skills and make a difference.

Consideration of individual characteristics including strengths, needs, as well as specific interests, coupled with implementation of proper supports can result in successful and ongoing employment (Hendricks, 2010). As previously mentioned, as more people with ASD transition out of high school and into adult programming such as employment, there is a clear need for programs to help these young adults reach their goals. It is my hope that programs like Project SEARCH are more widely funded and adopted to help individuals with ASD learn the skills needed to find gainful employment in integrated work settings alongside their neurotypical coworkers.

Nancy Fraher is Program Coordinator for Project SEARCH Autism Enhancement at The Arc Westchester.

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paper may not align with what employers are looking for in action. By asking for tangible examples of successful work, one is able to construct a model to refer to. From there, an individual should define what a poor, average, and successful performance looks like to serve as a model. This allows for measuring performance against a concrete classification of success and enables one to identify where they are meeting the mark and where improvement is needed. This can be incorporated through mentorship and collaboration with other existing employees that are performing to the expected standards.

How is success measured?

Knowing the manner in which an employer will be assessing performance is important to seek a clear understanding during the onboarding process. Gaining insight to the specifics one will be evaluated on is important so that they may structure their participation appropriately. An employee can request to see any review documents in advance of structured reviews. They can also clarify, based on requirements and metrics found in the review, to better understand how to meet and exceed expectations by asking questions.

Knowing Your Resources

What is provided by the employer?

During the onboarding process, explicit questions should be asked about what supports are available in terms of materials and team members. Laying out all options and reviewing when to utilize them provides one with an arsenal they are aware of. Rather than taking a reactive approach to problem-solving and seeking out answers during times of stress, having a clearly defined guide facilitates the decision-making

process and allows needs to be met sooner. Think of developing an On-Site Resource Guide: “When X happens, I should go to Y to assist, if I am having challenges.”

Who are the appropriate colleagues to reach out to?

Not everyone an individual works with is equipped to assist with all issues. Being knowledgeable of those around and their specialties continues to guide problem-solving and guarantees productive communication. New hires should try to build a relationship with an on-site mentor who can help point them to the appropriate colleagues when initially navigating the workplace. As time goes on, the new hire can continue to add to their On-Site Resource Guide.

Who else can be a source of support?

There are times where outside perspective and support may be beneficial. Creating a team of individuals outside of the workplace can allow one to practice skills while off the clock to strengthen their performance. Family members, friends, and job coaches present external perspectives of how those in the workplace may be perceiving the participation of the individual and can provide feedback more readily than coworkers.

Awareness Along the Way

How do we know if we need more?

It cannot be assumed that one will find the existing process accessible. Therefore, thinking critically about what is being provided helps to better make sense of the needs an individual has. Looking at what is readily available compared to the level of support necessary for success helps to see where potential areas of struggle may lie so that additional avenues of accommodations can be identified.

How do we communicate what we need?

The new employees should be prepared to state clearly what the need is and identify what resources have already been explored and evaluated. The purpose of this conversation is not only to communicate appropriately but also to outline how one can be successful in their role when armed with the most effective tools. Compiling the main points to be discussed previously and reviewing them with someone outside of the workplace best prepares the individual for the conversation.

When is the best time to have a conversation about accommodations?

During the onboarding process is the best time to communicate one's needs. As policies and procedures are presented, one must evaluate whether they will be able to work within the expectations with what is currently being provided. It is best to communicate needed accommodations prior to beginning work. Therefore, adjustments can be made and agreed upon while preserving one's confidence in their competence. It can be detrimental to one's employment to agree to expectations that are not attainable which can then negatively impact their self-concept.

Self-advocacy helps to ensure successful onboarding and the retainment of employment by arming an individual with all the necessary information needed to meet job expectations while also identifying additional support if needed. Clarifying work expectations, outlining accessible resources, and demonstrating awareness of needs allows individuals with ASDs to influence the onboarding process.

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E935). Some employees' use of “autistic person” may belie ableist beliefs and perpetuate stigma. Autistic people may react with scorn to workplace materials using person-first language and come to the conclusion that they are not truly valued by their employers. To prevent these kinds of misunderstandings from happening, all team members need to be on the same page regarding not just the use of identity language, but its greater implications.

Employers are in a unique position to accomplish this task. They can leverage the influence they have over employees to counter dominant (and often incorrect) perceptions of autism, all while empowering their autistic employees. The easiest way to do this is to actively include autistic people in curriculum development and to seek their input on complex issues like identity language. Not only will this make inclusion programs more authentic, but it will uplift autistic people and make their voices central to the story being told by these programs.

More importantly, it is the right and ethical thing to do. At the heart of the identity language debate is a desire to be heard, and including autistic perspectives addresses that need.

Identity Language in Action

To create a truly inclusive environment,

the preferences of the autistic community should always dictate what is codified in company materials. To that end, identity-first language should be used in inclusion training, with a disclaimer at the start of the training program explaining that some individuals still prefer person-first language and that the discussion surrounding these terms continues to evolve.

Moreover, when dealing with autistic employees directly, it is advised to ask what the individual's identity language preferences are, much like you would ask for someone's pronouns. Use of an autistic individual's identity language preference - whether it is identity-first or person-first - signals that they are cared for on a personal level, and implies a level of mutual respect. They are not just a diversity hire, but a person brimming with potential.

True Inclusivity

By no means should identity language serve as the be-all and end-all by which inclusion programs are judged. Nor does the “proper” use of identity language indicate that a work environment is truly inclusive, or that its inclusion program is working. Employees who take an anti-bias training course may come out of it *knowing* more about autism and identity language yet continue to exclude their autistic peers from after-work hangouts and small talk at the water cooler (Spoor et al., 8).

If a program does not address all the root causes of stigma against autistic people, then it will prove ineffective in creating a legitimately inclusive workplace (Link & Phelan, 381).

To that end, inclusivity cannot just be a superficial corporate initiative. It must also be a personal reckoning with deep-seated biases. That reckoning begins when one steps out of their comfort zone, actively listens to autistic people, and allows their perspectives on identity language and other aspects of the autistic experience to reshape their world. Only when autistic people are embraced as they truly are - not in spite of their autism, but because of it - can true inclusivity and allyship begin.

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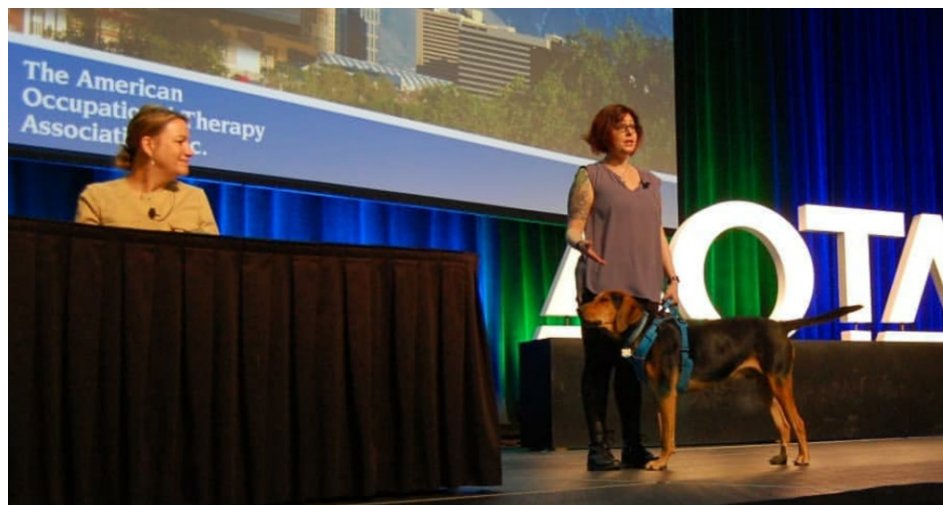
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Self-Employed from page 17

and a reason to figure out what I could do differently and better. I did this with all parts of my life but the one that was the most important, was rethinking employment. In theory, I was given some clues as to where some of my work struggles were originating, and I came to realize that employment was challenging to me for a number of reasons. Some were related to my personal brand of autism, like struggles with transitions and sensory overload, but some had nothing at all to do with it.

In fact, the stuff I struggled with most, was going to be the same no matter where I went to work. When I really looked at why work was such a challenge, it really came down to a lot of those unwritten social rules. For example, I simply cannot do a “normal” work schedule. My autistic brain hyper focuses and when it does, it takes me half the time of most to complete my tasks. It leaves me feeling trapped at work for no reason, a feeling I recognize from my school years. Additionally, in order for my time off to actually be restful AND productive, I need more time for my brain to transition out of work and into home mode, and vice versa.

Another struggle point for me lies with my colleagues and the unwritten rules. You know how we are taught to have pride in our work and standards? How our parents tell us to work hard, and we will be rewarded? Well, both of those are lies in the reality of the workplace. If you work too hard, your colleagues will not like you and will look for reasons to get you in trouble. If you work too slow, you also get in trouble from colleagues. If you don’t socialize at work or slack off on the internet with your colleagues, you are quickly shunned. If you don’t complain about your boss, your pay, or your job, you will also be shunned. As an autistic, I know no other way to do something than with



Becca presents on adult autism supports with her Emotional Support Animal, Walter, at the Association of Occupational Therapy’s National Conference.

150% of myself. I am uninterested in complaints without solutions. I cannot slack off at work without feeling guilty that I am stealing. For all of these reasons, and a few others, I am not built for the current American workplace, and neither are thousands of other autistic people.

Until recently, the solution for us has been to work part-time. Limiting our hours and contact, and also our income. As one of many autistic adults that would like to earn an income that I can live off of, I was faced with a choice. I could either begrudgingly get through my life going through cycles or I could get creative and make my own rules about work. Thusly, I chose to be creative and create my own path to an income that matched the life I wanted to live.

After years of watching my bosses make mistakes, I knew there was only one boss whose decisions I could tolerate, and that was me. It was time to go out on my own and make a living my way and on my terms. I was ready to be self-employed.

Self-employment is no easy route to take. It means no days off and many hours working for little or no pay. It means hustling every single day for ways to get paid. It means creating your own marketing and network. It means knowing your value enough to ask to be paid for your knowledge. It means budgeting EVERYTHING and many times it means going without. Still, what self-employment offers, makes all of that worth it ten times over.

In a world that finds difference to be a weakness, creating your own rules is looked at with suspicion. But for many of us on the spectrum, it is the only way that we can be happy adults and also maintain employment. It means control of your schedule and your spoons. It means choice when it comes dress, meals, and other personal needs. It means being able to balance your life, your loves, and your responsibilities. It means telling yourself that all this time you were capable, it was the systems that weren’t working. It means being hon-

est with those around you, and yourself, and admitting that world isn’t quite ready for us in all of our autism-ness.

I sit here writing this at an odd time in my work history. After 7 years of self-employment, I am taking a risk and returning to the one job of the 13 that I actually enjoyed, but it is not without taking the lessons that working for myself has given me. Self-employment taught me so much about myself, how resilient and creative I am, how I can face big decisions and make them because I trust myself and my strengths again, and how I can do the hard things and come out on top because I have learned not to fear making mistakes. Through the years, I have learned to confidently say yes to risks because I know now that I can be full of fear and courageous at the same time. In other words, I have learned my value, gotten my priorities in order, and know that under zero circumstances will I ever give up my personal freedoms in pursuit of a paycheck ever again, no matter how big.

As a kid, I struggled with authority figures for some of the same reasons I struggled with bosses in adulthood. My brain cannot help but to work at 150%. My brain cannot stand inefficiency. My brain has no tolerance for unjust and nonsensical behavior. My brain loves to create organization from chaos. My brain likes to streamline and edit. My brain does not see age, authority, position, power, color, race, or gender. My brain sees logical and illogical. In theory, this makes me an ideal employee. In practice, it makes self-employment the most logical and viable solution.

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Networking from page 20

- Understanding and using LinkedIn as a networking tool
- Understanding the value of informational interviewing as a networking tool
- Development of and practicing appropriate interview and follow-up questions

Included in the networking curriculum was a segment on learning about and conducting informational interviews. We worked with [Volunteer New York!](#) to create a series of workshops with their corporate clients where the participants with autism could participate in multiple informational interviews.

Two community partners were identified (a financial services company and a pharmaceutical company) who each identified 18-25 employees interested in volunteering their time to help participants with autism practice informational interviewing. The volunteer employees were self-selected and worth noting was their direct experience with a person with autism, an interest in learning more about autism, a recognition that people with autism are an untapped human resource for employment needs and/or a general interest in “doing good.” Several volunteer employees expressed a recognition of the role of mentors in their own career development and had an interest in “paying it forward.”

Volunteer employees were matched with a participant in advance of the informational interviews. All participants researched the person they were interviewing on LinkedIn. With coaching support, specific relevant questions were developed in addition to the general questions that were identified during the workshop series on informational interviewing. Multiple opportunities to practice asking questions, revising follow-up questions, listening for unexpected responses, being aware of body language, and tone of voice were offered.

The series of remote informational interviews were held over several weeks. Each interview included an adult with autism, a volunteer employee, and a coach to support all participants in the interview process. Interviews were scheduled over Zoom for 30 minutes. Many of the volunteer employees were seasoned staff with higher level positions. Every effort was made to match these employees with participants where there may be a shared interest. Even when that was not possible, the expectation was that the experience of conducting an informational interview expands awareness of potential vocational fields, encourages adults with autism to practice appropriately engaging with strangers, expands one’s network, and helps to build self-confidence. And, by including a coach during each interview, the adults with autism reported feeling less anxious and had the opportunity to receive specific feedback

about their interactions.

In general, both the volunteer employees and the participants described feeling a sense of satisfaction and intrigue in learning about each other and appreciation for the career lessons shared. More specific feedback included participants reporting feeling more confident in their ability to engage in appropriate conversation with others, feeling better prepared for future job interviews and an appreciation for their expanding network. Most participants in the informational interviews have connected with the volunteer employees via email or LinkedIn and in two cases have initiated a mentoring relationship.

The series of informational interviews ended in May 2021, and with time, we will assess its impact on employment acquisition. From this experience, participants have reported an increased self-awareness about their interests and strengths, have gained perspective about challenges, mistakes and successes in other people’s careers, expanded their knowledge of employment options and networking skills, and developed an increased sense of mastery and confidence.

Lesli Cattan, LCSW, is Director of Training and Marjorie Madfis, MBA, is Executive Director at Yes She Can, a nonprofit dedicated to helping young women with autism develop transferable job skills leading to employment and greater independence. Yes She Can operates its job skills training pro-

gram at Girl AGain boutique. We welcome visitors to see our program in action at Girl AGain boutique, located at 4 Martine Avenue, White Plains, NY 10606. For more information, visit www.YesSheCanInc.org and www.GirlAGain.com. To learn more about Yes She Can’s job skills development program send email to info@yesshecaninc.org.

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possible jobs (e.g., sales clerk, manager, construction worker, engineer, librarian, etc.). Whilst observing others or engaging in activities questions can be asked such as: “What jobs are involved when I go to McDonalds?” - the cashier, the cooks, their managers, where the food comes from – farms, processing plants, designing and manufacturing the packaging, building the restaurant, corporate management of the business / franchise, jobs in the banks that provide the financing etc.; “What jobs are involved in making this computer and getting it to me?” - designing the computer, manufacturing the parts to the computer, buying the parts from other companies that go in to the computer, software design, managing the people that do these jobs, sales and marketing, accounting, advertising, shipping, retail, etc. The adolescent can be encouraged to ask themselves questions such as, “What would these jobs be like and how would I get a job like that?”

Another useful strategy is simply asking people the young adult meets (including friends and relatives) questions about their job such as, “How did you get your job; What do you like / dislike about it; What qualifications do you need; How much do you get paid (if appropriate).” People the adolescent knows may be willing to have them visit their worksite for a job-shadowing experience where they observe that person at work for a couple of days. This will help enormously in exposing the individual to a variety of jobs (not only the individual they are shadowing but all the others who also work there), work environments, and realities of employment. Better still, actually volunteering at a company or organization will enable them to get hands on experience themselves in trying out different jobs. In addition, they can record these experiences on their resume and have sources for obtaining references. Even if the volunteer experience is not a great match to the adolescent’s interests, they can learn a variety of skills that would be applicable to any job such as responsibility, punctuality, reliability, interacting and communicating with others, and some of the realities of work such as having to do tasks which are less enjoyable, having to do things the way other people tell you to, only taking breaks at specific times, rules of the workplace such as no personal phone calls, no internet, etc.

Regarding the job application process itself, after some practice, searching for jobs, completing application forms, and preparing an eye-catching resume should not pose particular problems for individuals with autism. The internet provides some very useful resources in these areas and beyond including free job interest inventories, statistics on various job categories such as typical salary and necessary qualifications, lots of examples of resumes, job hunting tips, as well as of course the websites for various companies and organizations where the individual may be interested in working. However, there are some potential obstacles specific to the communication and social skills

challenges seen in autism that relate to the job application process. These may include coordinating the job search process, communicating with potential employers by telephone, and identifying and tapping the individual’s “social network” for employment leads (often the most successful approach to finding a job). Coordinating the job search process can be simplified by setting up a table with columns for job title applied for, when applied, how applied, contact person, follow up date, etc. Job seekers with autism can practice using the telephone by first calling relatives and others they know and slowly expanding this to individuals they know less well, perhaps the doctor’s office or hair salon, and finally to potential employers. A script can be implemented to help the conversation go smoothly and ensure the young adult gets all the information about the job or next steps that they need. A “spider-gram” type method can be used to help the young adult identify all the individuals in their immediate and expanded social network.

The job interview potentially poses the most significant challenge for autistic adults due to challenges in social skills and “mind reading.” For many individuals with autism, the job interview presents a critical block in achieving successful employment. Parents and family members can play an important role in conducting realistic mock job interviews with the young adult where they can practice appropriate behavior and how to answer typical job interview questions such as, “Why do you want this job?” “Why should I hire you and not someone else?” “What are your strengths / weaknesses?” etc.

Successful Employment: Strategies in the Workplace

Once the young adult with autism begins their job it may be useful for them or their supervisor to distribute a brief handout to co-workers describing autism and some of the strengths and challenges the individual may present with. This will help co-workers understand the behavior of the young adult and perhaps be more supportive. Identifying a co-worker who can serve as a “mentor” is also a useful strategy. Supervisors can be asked whether there are any employees who are familiar with autism or other types of neurodiversity who might be willing to serve in this role. This person can serve as an initial “go to” person when the young adult needs advice or if problems arise. They can also help them to integrate socially into the workplace which is critical for job retention and job satisfaction.

Providing supervisors with specific strategies for supporting the employee will also be helpful. Although many more employers will be more familiar with the term autism than in the past, they may have little idea of how to best support someone with autism in the workplace. Strategies used in the classroom remain extremely useful and are often easily adapted to the workplace. For example, supervisors can be encouraged to:

- Clearly define the job task and what exactly is expected of the individual.
- Break tasks down into smaller components if possible.
- Provide immediate and honest feedback on their performance.
- Minimize verbal instructions (perhaps provide written instructions) and allow time to respond.
- Provide models of the specific job skill.
- Allow the individual to complete one task before beginning another.
- Provide checklists and timelines for when and in what priority tasks should be done.
- Provide a strategy to communicate when they need help or have not understood.
- Remember the individual may have difficulty interpreting body language, reading between the lines, sarcasm, etc., so clear communication is critical.
- Be sensitive to resistance to change and provide as much routine and predictability as possible.
- Be sensitive to any sensory issues the individual may experience that interferes with their work.
- Explain the authority hierarchy (help avoid individual potentially being taken advantage of by co-workers).
- Encourage social interactions with co-workers.

- Explain the formal and informal rule structure of how things work at that job site.
- Explain unwritten rules of the workplace (these are often social and impact being accepted by co-workers, which ultimately impacts job retention).

Meeting and communicating with other autistic adults can also be helpful during this transition. Others with autism can provide advice and discuss their employment experiences from a neurodiverse perspective and help the individual realize they are not alone in the challenges they may experience. Finding social groups for young adults with autism can be difficult but they are increasing in number. Also, email chat groups on the internet can be found easily.

Building a career comes with positive and negative experiences for everyone. Reminding the young adult that mistakes and failures are useful learning experiences may help them maintain a positive attitude towards employment when things don’t go according to plan. Quitting jobs, declining jobs, and sometimes even accepting jobs, can result in negative consequences, but these too can be seen as important lessons for future decision making.

Sometimes seeing their child transition to the world of work can be difficult for parents too. However, it is important at this time in their life to allow the individual to become more independent, and to treat them as the adult they are. Allowing the young adult to make their own decisions and choices – with the guidance of others – will help ensure their employment success in the future and throughout their career.

Summary

Transitioning to employment is an exciting time in an adolescent’s life. However, for many with autism this transition can come with challenges and unfortunately there are currently few support services available to help them. However, a variety of different strategies can be implemented to help make this transition as smooth and positive as possible. These include preparing early and thoroughly particularly focusing on the fundamental “employment philosophies” such as the purpose and realities of employment, what different jobs exist and what they are like. Once employed, often strategies that may have been used in the classroom can be adapted and implemented in the workplace. We hope that as society increasingly recognizes the assets an autistic employee can bring to the workplace, more vocational supports will be made available. We look forward to rewarding employment becoming a reality for every adult with autism, empowering them to contribute to their communities and the larger society.

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Benefits from page 12

on their own, so offering them an affordable option to carry can be a valuable way to recruit and retain key talent.

It is also important to know exactly what benefits are on the life insurance policy. For example, will the employee be able to purchase and maintain their life insurance if they leave their position? Is that something you want to offer? These sorts of questions must be considered when you're picking a plan to suit your neurodiverse team.

Disability Insurance - Neurodiverse individuals are likely to have pre-existing medical conditions that make acquiring disability insurance on their own a difficult prospect. That's why it's important to not just offer disability insurance to your employees if you can, but to do your due diligence and make sure that they're eligible for what you're offering.

Disability, for insurance purposes, boils down to whether or not an employee can work, which overly simplifies – and even excludes – certain conditions. Many pre-existing conditions tend to be excluded. Fine print items may say if the individual can perform “any job,” they are excluded from collecting disability benefits. Some plans allow for part-time work, but some don't. Many employers do not want to deal with the hassle of setting up and doing the due diligence on all the tiny details with disability insurance, but it is worth every moment spent for the benefit it can give to your team.

Retirement and Investment

401(K), 403(B), Etc. - 401(k)s and 403(b)s both fall under the umbrella of “defined contribution plans” because there is a defined amount of contribution that the company and the employee can and will potentially put into the plan. There are many considerations that you may not have thought of when it comes to a defined contribution plan for neurodiverse employees. Most advisors are not specialists in group benefits, such as 401(k) plans. Even if they

are, they often do not understand how defined contribution plans can interact with disability or medical benefits an individual may or may not be receiving. Be careful simply signing up with the plan that your payroll company or your personal financial advisor recommends. Get an outside opinion and [schedule a consultation with one of our 401\(k\), 403\(b\), and pension experts](#) so you feel confident that the company you choose is prepared and able to present options to your neurodiverse workforce in an easy-to-understand way.

Balance is key – you want to offer your employees choices and flexibility so that they can see the impact of their investments firsthand, but not too many choices as to become overwhelming. You also need to consider several things on the back end such as part-time employees, long term employees, profit sharing, and more. A good provider will be able to help you work out all of these options and coordinate them in a way that works with your employee's existing benefits.

Financial Planning - [Financial planning](#) is a unique but useful benefit that employers can offer to employees who need it, at their discretion. Many neurodiverse individuals have questions about their money, benefits, and how that may affect them in the future, but do not have access to someone who can answer their inquiries.

You can directly address this critical need by hiring a financial planner to sit down with each employee to answer their financial questions, explain their benefits package, and educate them on their options. [Our financial planners specialize in working with neurodiverse people](#), and the services we offer can help enhance their quality of life while promoting the value of their employer. We have found that employers often **save** money, get more plan participants, and ultimately retain employees longer by including financial planning services with their retirement plans.

ABLE/Other - [ABLE accounts](#) are tax advantaged savings accounts specifically for individuals with disabilities. They are sim-

ilar to the more commonly known tax law surrounding 529 college savings plans and are also called 529A plans. ABLE account benefits can be easily afforded and offered by employers simply by enabling the employee to take a portion of their check and have it go directly into an ABLE account from the payroll direct deposit, much like a 401(k) contribution. This is a great benefit because the employer can simply be the facilitator of the benefit. An alternative for individuals who are not eligible for ABLE accounts at your organization would simply be to offer direct deposit into traditional college savings accounts. If your employees don't have ABLE accounts, [we specialize in helping people set up and manage ABLE accounts for their neurodivergent employees](#).

Other Benefits

There are many other benefits that employers can offer that go beyond “traditional”. These ala carte benefits can attract and retain key employees, offer a unique value proposition for your workforce, and may be offered in lieu of traditional benefits a neurodiverse employee may not be able to take advantage of.

Transportation - Transportation tends to be a barrier that prevents many neurodiverse and disabled people from holding a job, so offering transportation benefits can serve to attract and retain talent. While this kind of benefit is a no-brainer for employers who see their employees commute via public transportation in cities, you can also assist with transportation by offering a direct cash benefit or a ride sharing commuting service. If assembled correctly, transportation benefits are not taxable to the employee and can produce a huge boost in employee satisfaction & workplace productivity. As long as transportation benefits are non-discriminatory and offered to all employees, they can be an invaluable option for your workforce.

Dependent Care - An employer has the ability to set aside employee compensation

in a tax advantaged way to cover things such as dependent care. This is extremely important at a time when more and more adults in the household are working. Dependent care benefits can be used not only for childcare, but for elderly adults and disabled family members who need round-the-clock care. These kinds of benefits also factor in caretakers of disabled individuals as well as the individuals themselves.

Legal Services - Legal services are an important and often overlooked benefit that employers can offer. This can be beneficial not only for neurodiverse individuals, but for **all** employees making it a great, competitive and relatively simple to acquire benefit to offer. An employer can negotiate a discounted rate with pre-screened attorneys in different areas of expertise, making it incredibly cost effective. There are also legal insurance plans which work in many ways like health insurance plans do. The employee pays a monthly premium. If and when they happen to need legal services, they will have access to an attorney who can help them without any out-of-pocket costs. This comes at no or very low cost to an employer, as the employee is paying the premium.

For a neurodiverse individual, routine and predictability can be among the most important aspects to their success. We all know, when we need legal help it tends to be due to something unexpected. Having legal help already accessible and attainable in this way may be the difference between a situation running smoothly or a complete meltdown making this a benefit one that is not just highly enticing but gives a competitive edge to a potential employer.

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Autism Spectrum News Editorial Calendar

Fall 2021 Issue:
“Challenging Behaviors and Autism”
Deadline: September 2, 2021

Winter 2022 Issue:
“Improving Lives with Technology”
Deadline: December 3, 2021

Spring 2022 Issue:
“Education and Autism”
Deadline: March 3, 2022

Summer 2022 Issue:
“Understanding & Treating Co-Occurring Conditions”
Deadline: June 7, 2022

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Hiring from page 1

their regular recruiting and interviewing practices. These programs include screening processes developed specifically for autistic individuals that require candidates to spend anywhere from one to several weeks in hands-on activities and team exercises at the company, to judge their technical and work readiness skills, before determining which candidates will receive an offer of permanent employment. Individuals who do receive an offer may be hired as part of a dedicated team of specialists, working under one manager, on a specific task (i.e. data analysis or software testing), or they may be assigned to jobs within the organization. These multi-week screening programs can be run by the employer or by third party organizations hired to assist with the process.

Integrated Hiring Processes - Other companies choose to integrate their autism hiring efforts into their existing recruiting and interviewing practices. This entails detailed reviews of current recruiting and interviewing practices to make modifications appropriate for autistic candidates. Some of the key areas of focus in such a review include:

- Reviewing current diversity and inclusion practices related to people with disabilities
- Determining appropriate open roles available for autistic candidates
- Writing “autism-friendly” job descriptions
- Reviewing the interview process, including review of questions, inclusion of skills-based testing and determination of appropriate interview formats (e.g., individual interviews, panel interviews, etc.)
- Determining training needed for recruiters, hiring managers and other staff to ensure they know how to create an ap-



Marcia Scheiner

propriate interview experience for autistic candidates

Autistic individuals hired through this approach go through an employer’s typical recruiting and interviewing process, allowing for customized modifications based on each candidate’s needs, with the goal of obtaining an inclusive role in the organization.

Regardless of which model an employer chooses, the hiring of the candidate is just the beginning. All successful models include structured ongoing support for both the autistic employees and their managers.

Specialized Companies - In addition to large corporations seeing the value in hiring autistic talent, a number of companies, founded specifically to hire predominantly neurodivergent professionals, have been founded by autistic individuals, allies of those on the spectrum and business entrepreneurs. Many of these companies, such as Ultronauts, Daivergent, Iterators, Autonomy Works, Aspiritech and Auticon focus on technology related jobs.

Where Do You Find Autistic Talent?

With the growth of neurodiversity hiring programs, the frustrating reality for the autism community is that the under- and unemployment rate for autistic individuals has not seen any noticeable improvement. Even companies with the most developed autism hiring programs claim they struggle at times to find autistic talent to fill open roles. This challenge is driven by two factors. One, many of the opportunities being identified for autistic candidates today are in technology. While 35% of eighteen-year-olds with an autism spectrum diagnosis attend college (Shattuck et al., 2012), not all of them are interested in or qualified for technology-related roles. As a result, this creates a relatively small talent pool for technology jobs. Employers who think more broadly about the roles available for autistic employees will find a broader candidate pool.

Two, in seeking autistic candidates, many employers look to the traditional source for employees with disabilities: local vocational services agencies. Not everyone with autism, particularly college graduates, registers with their state vocational agency, as these organizations are not always effective in finding competitive employment for autistic candidates with college or advanced degrees. Employers also report mixed experience with vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. A 2018 study completed by the United States Government Accountability Office found that “(e)mmployers in one of four discussion groups said that VR does not always provide enough qualified job candidates to meet their needs, and employers in another discussion group said that job candidates referred by VR are not always good matches for their hiring needs.” (GAO Publication No. GAO-18-577, p. 14)

Conclusion

Standard recruiting and interviewing practices are a barrier to entry to the work-

force for most autistic jobseekers. In 2013, SAP led the way in trying to combat this problem by establishing the first Autism@Work program targeted at hiring professional level autistic individuals. Since then, over 50 other U.S. corporations have launched or announced plans for similar programs. While these programs are still in their infancy in terms of tackling the level of under- and unemployment in the autism community, they can provide a viable option for autistic talent. Since not every company implements the same model when establishing an autism hiring initiative, it is important to evaluate the available models to determine which will be the best fit for your needs.

Marcia Scheiner is President of Integrate Autism Employment Advisors. This article is adapted from the author’s upcoming book “The Neurodivergent Job Candidate: Recruiting Autistic Professionals” due out later this year. For additional information, please contact the author at marcia@integrateadvisors.org or visit Integrate’s website at www.integrateadvisors.org.

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I also recall instances of on-campus interviews before my graduation which resulted in no job offer, while other students whose grades were (sometimes significantly) less than mine received offers from the same employer. I should mention that the job market in my field was especially good at the time. One especially memorable incident involved a chance meeting with a former employee of a company that I had applied to a few years earlier. He told me that he remembered those times well, and that this employer was so desperate for workers that they would have hired a chimpanzee if one had applied for the position. Once again, something other than the quality of my credentials must have been at play.

The situation began to deteriorate in the early 2000’s, with the “bursting of the tech bubble,” which resulted in massive layoffs in industries that were based (or relied) on modern technologies - terms like “downsizing” and “offshoring” became commonplace - and culminated in the financial crisis of 2008. In its aftermath were frequent news reports of 5 or 6 applicants for every available job; the result was a job market where employers could choose from many qualified applicants for every position they needed to fill. Often heard

were commentaries that so-called “soft” skills, such as interpersonal and communication skills, were especially desired (to me, this was an acceleration of the trend started many years earlier). Also highly valued were such traits as flexibility and adaptability (bad news for autistics who famously have difficulty responding to change), as well as multitasking (again, not good for autistics with poor executive functioning skills). The result of this is that, as adverse as this employment climate was for everyone, autistics were especially disadvantaged. These were terrible times to be an autistic trying to find work and live independently.

One thing that I vividly remember from the ensuing period is an interview, on a network news program, of the CEO of a major online employment website several years ago. When asked what employers were looking for in the current job market, he said that, according to many hiring managers, the three most sought-after skills were interpersonal, social, and communication skills. As a member of a community that lives with challenges in these areas, I (needless to say) found this very disturbing indeed. Even more disturbing, however, was his subsequent comment that this should not be a problem for prospective job applicants because of the many classes, workshops, and seminars available to rem-

edy such deficiencies. I seriously question the value of such miniscule measures for *anyone*, and can confidently say that, for those of us *anywhere* on the autism spectrum, the very idea that they could easily “fix” something that we have been challenged by our entire lives would be laughable were it not so tragic.

What Can Be Done?

There have been some bright spots in the effort to find employment for autistics. Major corporations (SAP, Microsoft, Walgreens, JPMorgan Chase, and Freddie Mac, to name a few) have created initiatives to hire autistics for specialized tasks at which they excel, recognizing that there are jobs which autistics can often perform and even excel at, making their employment profitable for the bottom line. Other companies, such as Specialisterne and Aspiritech, hire primarily from the autistic population. It is a good sign that autistics are being recognized for what they can do rather than dismissed because of their deficits. Still other organizations, such as Integrate Autism Employment Advisors (formerly ASTEP), serve to promote the hiring of autistics by major corporations and other large organizations. As praiseworthy as these efforts have been, I fear that they will not be enough. Considering

the large size of the autistic population (the currently accepted incidence rate of 1 in 59 implies several million autistics in the U.S.), these jobs will only be available to a small percentage of the community.

It has always been my opinion that, in the past, there were many jobs that capitalized on common autistic skills and talents and yet were very plentiful. For example, repair and other technician jobs (what I would most likely have done had I not become an engineer) were highly abundant (I can remember at least one repair shop on every block in New York City when I was growing up), before it became cost-ineffective to repair most appliances and before much of U.S. manufacturing went overseas. Also, accounting and bookkeeping jobs were plentiful before personal computers automated these tasks, as were library and other research jobs prior to the advent of online search engines. These are just a few examples of jobs that many autistics could have been (and undoubtedly many were) employed at, long before the diagnosis even existed. Unfortunately, there is less and less demand for these skills, and more and more demand for skills that autistics are typically deficient in. Consequently, many autistics who may have found employment

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many years ago will have great difficulty in the present day.

Another initiative that has appeared on the scene are small businesses designed to be staffed primarily (if not entirely) by autistics. At a presentation about these efforts, I asked one of the speakers why it happened that, given news reports that the great majority of new businesses in the post-2008 recovery were small in size, there were no efforts, comparable to those for large corporations, to promote the hiring of autistics by these small businesses. The speaker replied that, although my comments were entirely correct, business owners nowadays want smaller numbers of employees who are adaptable and flexible, in particular, to perform a wide variety of tasks and to quickly “fill in” for other employees in their absence, even when not familiar with their jobs. Once again, their well-known autistic deficits make them less-desirable candidates for these jobs.

The Secrets of My Employment Success

Although, admittedly, my personal experiences with employment can hardly be considered typical for the autism community, some aspects may nevertheless apply to significant portions of the autistic population.

First, I quickly learned what I was good at in school and what I was not. Fortunately, my talents were in technical subjects such as physics, mathematics, drafting, and computer programming. Also, given my “obsession” since childhood with anything mechanical, electrical, or electronic, it was a foregone conclusion that I would attend an engineering college, which prepared me for a marketable occupation that I had aptitude for. More generally, autistics (and those who support them) need to understand that their restricted areas of ability and interest offer the best (perhaps only) hope of future employment, and that preparation for occupations that capitalize on these must be pursued as strongly as possible.

Second, as previously mentioned, I found

a work environment in which my autistic differences, although not yet known as such at the time, were if not fully embraced at least tolerated (sadly, this is not true of most work environments nowadays). Every effort should be made to identify such environments and to place autistics in them whenever possible.

Finally, I realized (literally at the very beginning of my career) that I did not want to be a manager, even though this is considered the traditional career path (and even the “holy grail”) for those in my field and position. At the time, I observed that managers dressed more formally and spent considerable time at business-related meals. As it happens, I have sensory sensitivities involving clothing, along with severe selective-eating restrictions. Both are common autistic issues and, as such, were not as trivial as they were considered back then. Much more serious, however, is the fact that management positions require vastly different skills from those of their staff members; in particular, interpersonal and political skills are essen-

tial. My decision was vindicated years later when, after my diagnosis, I read an article by Temple Grandin in which she described how many autistics in various fields were so successful that they were promoted to management but subsequently let go after an average of six months. Instead, I was able to have a career that lasted almost thirty years. Just because an autistic is capable, or even outstanding, at one position is no guarantee that this will remain the case after a promotion or even reassignment to another post or department. Careful consideration must be given, particularly to skills and talents that are required for the new position.

Although much has been done to improve the situation and public awareness of both the potential and the challenges of autistics has substantially increased, I suspect that the problem of employment will continue to plague the autistic community for the foreseeable future.

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working with New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority, since I’ve enjoyed researching what they do. Some of their jobs might be very complicated (like driver or conductor), but maybe I could work at transit locations, organizing things, cleaning,

giving out directions for lost passengers, or advocating for transit accessibility.

Career of Interest (3) - Autism Project: I might like a job that would allow me to expand the reach of my autism blog and YouTube Channel, while helping the autistic community. For my project’s purpose, I

would like a job in advocating, interviewing, making videos, and working with autistic children. Perhaps I could work with a business or nonprofit organization, or anywhere else that will open some doors for many people with disabilities.

As an Autism Advocate, Michael Lettman

hopes that there will be many job openings that will accept people with autism as wonderful employees. He also hopes to find a fulfilling career that will keep him happy for years to come. You can learn more about Michael at his [Living with Autism blog](#). You can also check out his [Living with Autism YouTube Channel](#).

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working in environments that are not well-suited for their neurology and cognitive styles. As a result of the resulting PTSD, these individuals experienced heightened emotional response to stress that may lead to adrenal fatigue, emotional exhaustion, chronic fatigue, and burnout.

It is important to cultivate and environment where adults have the freedom to be vulnerable and allow their true selves to shine. Creating a work-life balance and a reasonable schedule is crucial for emotional healing.

I have developed a tiered approach that is designed specifically for each employee’s neurology. It is unrealistic to expect that all individuals are ready to work a full-time schedule. Some of our employees are beginning the healing process, building up their stamina and resilience, and may only be able to work a few hours a day. Moreover, early mornings are often not a possibility and therefore, they start work after noon. If tasks can be completed remotely, that is an option; however, many of our media projects require collaboration and working together as a team to set up video productions.

The media team is comprised of individuals on the autism spectrum and they have all experienced traumatic situations in traditional workplace settings and are very supportive of one another. The team has the autonomy to determine when they want to set up a video production. If they want to work late in the afternoon or late into the evening, that is a possibility. Their hours are increased as their stamina begins to increase. When traditional employers suggest that our approach may not behoove our employees if they have to conform to another traditional setting in the

future, my response is, “Why can’t this be the model that is used for traditional settings as well?”

Invalidation and Gaslighting

Individuals on the autism spectrum may be reticent to share their feelings with their employers for fear of rejection or retaliation, and they may have difficulty trusting coworkers with their emotions. Many autistic adults have been victims of dysfunctional relationships that included emotional manipulation such as invalidation and gaslighting. Research findings show that children whose emotions were invalidated demonstrate difficulties in emotional regulations later in life (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to validate concerns and build trust in the employer-employee relationship.

It is imperative to mitigate any unnecessary stress including hidden rules, unclear expectations, and indirect communication. Ways that we build trust include being transparent, direct, validating employee’s concerns and feelings, and ensuring that employees know where they stand. Invalidation is actually a form of emotional manipulation and includes judging, minimizing, or rejecting someone’s feelings (Linehan, 1993).

A few examples include:

- “It could be a lot worse.”
- “You really shouldn’t feel that way.”
- “I am sure that they didn’t mean to say that (or do that) to you.”

When someone’s feelings are invalidated it can lead to despair, anxiety, emotional overload and confusion. Often this is

paired with gaslighting that is defined as creating another person’s reality. We must create authentic environments where employees do not have to second guess themselves or their realities.

Time for Rest and Recuperation

Individuals on the autism spectrum demonstrate empathy. One of the greatest misconceptions is that autistic adults do not have the capability to empathize, or that they do not experience attachment to people or animals. Often, autistic individuals are highly empathetic and have strong bonds with their family members as well as their family pets.

Even if employees are part-time, we believe that they deserve paid time off for bereavement. One of our employees recently lost his family pet and was grieving. Although pet bereavement is not a typical benefit to most employees, we believe that it should be. Spectrum Fusion paid an hourly employee for three days of leave so he could grieve the loss of his pet. He returned ready to face new challenges.

Our employees have a desire to work but in a way that suits their strengths and cognitive styles. I was told one time that “Spectrum Fusion is better than real life.” Let’s create workplace environments that are safe and allow individuals to make their dream of sustaining employment a reality.

Heidi Stieglitz Ham, PhD, is CEO and Founder of Spectrum Fusion and Adjunct Professor at Rice University. For more information, visit www.SpectrumFusion.org.

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Job Search from page 25

Demonstrated ability to effectively communicate with diverse populations. Able to lead and deliver pertinent information in an engaging and entertaining presentation. Record of success in achieving increased return visitor and customer satisfaction scores.

- Quantify and use strong active verbs.
- Revise and prioritize accomplishment and responsibility bullets according to how they address the needs of the position.
- Limit the resume to one page.
- Remember that there is no one way to prepare a resume. There are many variations, but all should allow a reader to get a sense of your skill match by scanning from top to bottom in thirty seconds or less - because that is about how much time a person reviewing hundreds of resumes will give it.

Your **cover letter** is where you give the reader a greater sense of “you” in relation to your skills and accomplishments. Elaborate on certain aspects of your experience that were benchmarks for your success and of which you are proud. In short: explain how you match the job requirements and confirm the position as one about which you are very interested in learning more. Close by setting the expectation: “I look forward to meeting with you soon.”

The Organization for Autism Research’s *Hire Autism Guide* provides examples of [resumes](#), [cover letters](#), and even [resources for parents](#).

You do not want your best efforts on resumes and cover letters to be compromised by a few grammatical errors. Grammatical language impairment is sometimes a characteristic of autism spectrum disorder, according to a study by [Frontiers in Psychology](#). If this is not you, pursue that writing career (as countless autistic

people are doing now). However, millions of job opportunities exist where writing is not a requirement for a great future. In either case, abide by the spell check function and have someone proofread your work!

Conducting a Job Search

Consider this your part/full time job for the moment. Dedication, focus, and an integrated strategy using multiple resources are the best method for results. Most important: do not get discouraged! The job market is competitive for everyone. Do your best not to take rejection personally. Often, it’s not about you.

Here are the most effective resources for conducting a comprehensive job search:

1) Networking - This is foremost in importance and is the way in which many people will find their job. A mix of old and new is the best approach.

Social Media is one of the most valuable tools in connecting to the right people. **LinkedIn** is the primary platform for professional information sharing and employment opportunities and is a must; it will not only connect you to people but acts as a means for hiring managers to find you and review your profile ([learn how to create a LinkedIn profile here](#)).

- Once you create your profile, begin by searching for people you know: friends, relatives, teachers, former employers, etc. Much like other platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, etc.), you will see their connections. Build your network by requesting to connect with their friends, relatives, and business associates.
- Search for companies and industries of interest and “follow” them.
- Join groups for your areas of interest.

As you build your network and begin to

apply for jobs directly through LinkedIn you will begin to see how your connections may be related to that company. Make a direct connection (“Hi, John. I see you know my cousin Robert. I just applied for this position and hope you will review it / ask HR to be sure they receive it.”) or ask your personal connection to introduce you (“Hi Robert! Your colleague John is hiring for a job I’d really like to be considered for. Can you introduce me?”)

Informational Meetings are an excellent way to meet people directly. Ask people you know if they would be willing to arrange a short meeting between their associates and you, especially if their connection is to one of your targeted companies. The goal is three-fold:

1. Find out more by asking researched questions about that company
2. Get that person to like you
3. Ask for names, phone, and email for 2-3 people to whom they might be willing to reference you.

They will either keep your resume in case a job becomes available or reference you to someone else they know. Keep doing this to build the network. While you may have known nobody in the beginning, now you have a network of people who are familiar with you and want to help. Your request is simple: “Hello, Mr. Smith. My cousin Robert suggested I reach out to you. Would you be willing to meet with me for about 15 minutes so I may find out more about the company and what you do? I’d also love it if you could review my resume and provide feedback.” (People love to help others!)

**** The intention is to build a network. It is not for a job unless that person decides to interview you. **You will need to decide whether you want to disclose your autism. This is a personal choice. If the**

company already has a program for developmental disabilities, disclosing may actually work to your advantage. You may also choose to inform the person that you are autistic but have marketable skills and are just looking for opportunities to show what you can do. But the choice is yours only.

2) Search Engines and Job Boards - Register for job search engines such as [Indeed](#), [Zip Recruiter](#) and [Idealist](#) as well as job boards related to your industries of interest. Set up job alerts to receive daily or weekly emails with position openings targeted to your experience and interests.

Here are some other resources for conducting a job search, including guides for the interview process:

- [Hire Autism Guide: Preparing for the interview](#)
- [Inc dot Com: Interview questions](#) (You may be asked these, especially if you choose not to disclose, so best be prepared.)

Once again, this is a quick tip guide to get started and hopefully increase your application response rate. It is advisable to obtain the services of support organizations, government agencies such as **VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) services** ([here is a list of agencies in every state](#)), and independent career counselors who specialize in working with autistic individuals at all levels of experience and cognition for interviewing purposes, being offered employment, and retaining a job long-term.

Learn more about Spectrum Works and our job training and life skills programs for transitional age young adults at <https://www.spectrumworks.org>

Good luck in your search. Now get that job!

Michael Giorgio is Communications and Business Development Manager at [Spectrum Works, Inc.](#)



Greater Hudson Valley, NY, Support Groups

One Sunday a month from 10:30 am - 12:30 pm

YAI Tarrytown - 677 White Plains Road, Tarrytown, NY 10591

Free Support Group for the Family Members of Adults with an Asperger/Autism Spectrum Profile

This support group, formerly known as Families of Adults with Asperger’s Syndrome/High Functioning Autism (FAAHFA) is now a part of the Asperger/Autism Network (AANE). This group is for parents, family members and friends of adult individuals who have an Asperger or similar autism spectrum profile. We will be hosting guest speakers at many of our meetings to address various topics of importance related to our loved ones.

Our mission is to help people with Asperger Syndrome and similar autism spectrum profiles build meaningful, connected lives.

For more information, visit the website www.aane.org or contact the facilitators:
Bonnie Kaplan - Parenttalk@gmail.com | Judith Omidvaran - Judyomid@aol.com

Socialization and Life Skills Group for Adults with an Asperger/Autism Spectrum Profile

This support group, Opening Doors, is now in partnership with the Asperger/Autism Network (AANE). This group is for adults who have an Asperger or similar autism spectrum profile. Learn, socialize and receive support from others who share common experiences.

Focused on: Socialization, Mindfulness, Creativity, Self-Advocacy, Health and Well Being, Career Counseling, Relationships and Fun!

For more information, contact the facilitators:

Anna L. Nasci, OTR/L, MS, NCC, LMHC | Masako Hashimoto, MS, NCC, LMHC - OpeningDoorsWestchester@gmail.com

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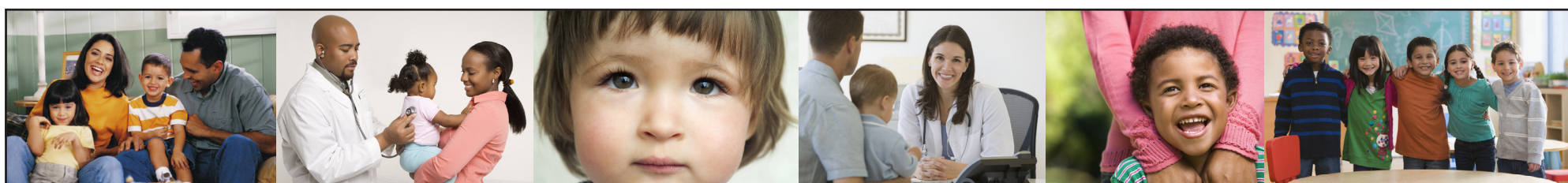
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