

Understanding the Employment of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

“What do we know? What are we missing?”

Facilitators asked the group to discuss their knowledge of employment and autism. It was concluded that while there are a great deal of presumptions relating to employment of adults with autism, little hard data exists to back it up. To a large extent, the community is relying on anecdotal information and unscientific impressions, rather than quality data and information on evidence-based interventions. Think Tank participants shared impressions and concerns as described below:

- _ Unemployment for adults with autism is too high and is too easily accepted.
- _ Too many students, upon leaving high school, are not “career ready.” They lack self-advocacy skills and generally cannot identify their strengths.

Accommodations

Because of their behavioral, communication, and sensory challenges, some people with autism appear to need more supports than those with other developmental disabilities. Job coaches and employers often do not know how to redesign the workplace to support employees with autism.

“Soft Skills”

Adults with autism are more apt to successfully learn and perform “hard skills” directly related to a job. “Soft skills” such as small-talk, office politics, and team-oriented projects often prove more challenging. These softer skills, though, are highly valued in the workplace and are often unspoken requirements to remain employed or be considered for promotion. Bullying by coworkers and managers can also be a problem in some work settings.

*“Schools use a ‘deficit model.’ I know what is wrong with me, but not what I’m good at.”
-An Employee with Autism*

Myths

There is often a presumption that adults with autism are not capable of meaningful, complex work. As a result, many students with ASD are not sufficiently prepared with the skills needed for employment. Teachers must be encouraged to believe that students with autism can and will grow up to hold jobs, and they should instruct their students and help plan their educational goals with this in mind.

Fading Out the Job Coach

Employment models that rely on 1:1 or 2:1 job coach-to-employee ratios can be costly, impossible to sustain, and ultimately detrimental to the person with autism. People with autism should receive direct instruction on how to manage and monitor their own behavior in order to avoid relying too heavily on job coaches in the long term.

Transition from School to Work

At the conclusion of a student's high school education, he/she often experiences a precipitous decline in services, including speech and language therapy. Transition planning needs to be dynamic and begin early in adolescence. Too often transition focuses on "placing" a person with autism in a job and fails to account for the arc of a career path that includes promotions or changes in jobs or industries. For those with significant challenges, it is especially important that instruction be practical and community-based.

Legislation

Newly proposed provisions of Section 503 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 would require that employers awarded federal and state contracts maintain a workforce in which at least 7% of their employees have self-disclosed disabilities. Non-compliant employers would run the risk of losing federal funds or incurring other penalties. These changes, if adopted, would help create an added incentive for employers to recruit and retain employees with autism.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- _ Teaching and reinforcing the skill of positively "accepting correction" – a common negative experience when one is new on the job, particularly for an individual with autism who has social skill deficits.
- _ Developing a "sensory scan" or "social scan" tool that can help someone with autism independently identify and then advocate for the supports he or she might need to function well in the workplace.
- _ Teaching essential vocabulary to people with autism to help them better describe their experiences, such as the feelings of sensory overload and other challenges.
- _ Starting early on to teach self-monitoring skills to people with autism, thereby minimizing the need for employer instruction and preparing these future employees to self-regulate in the workplace.

Interview Process

Business leaders suggested:

- _ Using the entire building as the interview location, so that the prospective employee can preview the work environment and develop a realistic idea of the job.
- _ Interviewing for trainability, not for specific skills.
- _ Avoiding sarcasm and humor in the interview process or in the supervision of an employee, as individuals with autism often have a very concrete understanding of language and tend to interpret words literally.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- _ Avoiding jargon and small talk during the interview, as these "soft skills" can

be very challenging for individuals with ASD.

- _ Clarifying expectations during the interview and in written job descriptions.
- _ Expanding the interview process to include a job preview (a walk-through of the actual job that is to be performed).
- _ Waiving formal interviews in favor of trial work days.
- _ Using internships as part of training and assessment.

Job Accommodations

Business leaders suggested:

- _ Teaching the job where it will be performed.
- _ Considering the sensory experiences of the employee.
- _ Avoiding lowered expectations or patronization, being sure to treat employees with autism as one would other staff and being direct and specific about the skills required.
- _ Reconsidering the role of the job coach as follows:
 1. Building a network of natural supports.
 2. From the first day, preparing for the job coach to leave.
 3. Devising a fade plan that allows for support to move in and out as needed.
 4. Pulling back job coaches to allow employees to respond and problem solve independently.

Consumers and academic experts suggested:

- _ Considering cognitive and sensory “curb cuts” as a way to create more accessible entry points into the workplace.
- _ Viewing the job coach as an accommodation.
- _ Breaking down tasks into component parts for instruction.
- _ Using visual information and cues to help train employees.
- _ Using competence measures that evaluate job-specific skills.