

INTRODUCTION

Having a job can enhance a person's quality of life. Not only does it provide an income, but it also builds skills, connects people, expands a person's community contacts, and brings focus to the day.

In 2015, the United Nations website stated that approximately 80% of autistic adults are unemployed. There are a number of barriers that keep this statistic so high such as a shortage of job training programs, inadequate support for job placement, a lack of supports/accommodations in the workplace, and pervasive discrimination.

Autistic individuals can bring a lot to a job such as dependability, reliability, concentration, memory skills, attention to detail and accuracy, and factual knowledge, just to name a few. Every person is unique with their own talents, abilities, and interests. We need to find the right supports and a structured environment to nurture these capabilities.

One of the best ways to introduce the world of work is through volunteering. Volunteer jobs can provide the same exposure to pertinent job skills such as reporting to a manager, working on a team, wearing a uniform, shift work, completing tasks from a checklist, the opportunity to try different jobs, etc. There is also a chance to gain work experience to put on a resume. Volunteer contacts can be a great source for finding employment because they are involved in different areas of the community.

The most important thing to do when preparing for the world of work is to start early. Autistic individuals need time to gain skills and be able to generalize them across a variety of settings. This is called critical mass. Volunteering, school work experience, and job training programs provide the time and opportunities to build skills.

Successful employment depends on finding the right type of job with the correct supports. Some individuals may always need a support person with them. Most will need a structured environment with accommodations. When an employer understands the needs of a person, a few additional supports can be the difference between success and failure.

Finding successful employment is a long term process. It is much more than writing a resume and doing a job interview. Preparation, planning, and patience really are the keys to a solid chance at employment.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

Director, Autism Awareness Centre Inc.

Volunteering

Volunteering provides an important opportunity to prepare for the world of work. People with ASD need time and experience to build skills and feel comfortable out in the community. Volunteering within a preferred interest can help a person meet other like-minded people who share their passion for that activity.

My children began volunteering every summer at a Farmer's Market at age 13 and 11. At that job, they learned how to report to a manager, follow simple instructions, carry out tasks in a specific order, practice conversation skills, problem solve, punctuality, and how to look presentable at a work site.

Julia, now 22, is successfully volunteering at a cat care facility. She has wanted to work with cats since she was 13 years old. Because she came to that position with her experience from the Farmer's Market, she knew how to sign in for work, report to a manager, and perform in tasks in a specific order. In essence, she had gained critical mass from the other job to be able to do this one successfully.

Find Motivation

Not everyone is motivated by money, nor is it always meaningful to people with ASD. What can be meaningful is creating an understanding of what money can do for you. When my children began volunteering at such a young age, I wanted them to understand the concept of what working a certain number of hours meant. At the Farmer's Market, the shift was 3 hours, one day a week. I created a work chart for the shifts so each time they worked a shift, they got a check mark. At the end of the month, they had 4 check marks, enough to choose a toy or DVD. They could also bank those check marks to get something more expensive. Both children knew what they were working toward which kept them motivated. They also learned that they had to work more shifts to buy something more expensive.

They still don't understand the concept of money, but do understand the concept of spending time at a job to earn something they really want. Money is not necessarily a motivator for people with ASD so think about creating other ways to inspire them.

Redefine Work

When talking about employment, it seems to be with the goal of full time work. For some adults with ASD, this may not be achievable. Look at part-time work, shorter work days (just a morning or an afternoon), entrepreneurship where you can make your own hours, or some volunteering at a place where you can build skills. For example, I have been investigating a charity that helps mothers with young children. This charity has a number of initiatives, but their main one is cooking and preparing meals for the moms. Since Julia has an interest in cooking and wants to gain skills in this area, this could be a win-win. In time, it could lead to a job with another organization.

Employment Training Programs

We pulled our daughter from a government sponsored training program geared for autistic people. I was surprised at how the program was run. The participants were taken to a new job site every week which caused great anxiety. The job sites were not chosen based on a person's interest or ability, but rather where the program coordinator could find a business that would allow autistic people to try a job. Some of the places were Goodwill, a mattress recycling plant, and a busy concession stand at a stadium. After the second week, my daughter said to me, "Mom, these jobs don't make any sense for autistic people. We have difficulty communicating, but we are dealing with customers which is really hard for us." So that was the end of that.




These programs are also not helping the participants find meaningful work after the training is over. For my son, I was given a list of places to approach after his job training finished. It was very hard approaching these businesses on my own trying to find a job for my son. He didn't have the ability to do it on his own.

The Resume and Job Interview

Due to a lack of traditional work experiences in the teen years, putting together a resume can be hard. Think about creating a non-traditional resume of skills and interests. Because both of my children have difficulty communicating, I did this with visuals. I used photos of things they have done to be able to show a potential employer that they do have skills and interests that could benefit a business. Photos or other visuals could also help in an interview or intake process because high anxiety can cause a communication shutdown. I took the last 6 books my son had read to his intake interviews because he just couldn't answer questions or speak due to nerves. It showed the interviewer that he could read at a high level and read a wide variety of topics. It was impressive.

Entering the world of work is a long term process. Take small steps and try to find the best way to build skills through on-going practice at activities. Try and have as many experiences as possible because each experience can give you something that could help with future employment.

For further reading:

-  [*Career Training and Personal Planning for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*](#)
-  [*Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism*](#)
-  [*Teaching Pre-Employment Skills to 14-17-Year-Olds*](#)