

Diversity in Ontario's Youth and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Finding and Keeping Employment

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This article summarizes some of the information contained in the recent report entitled Diversity in Ontario's Youth and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Complex Needs in Unprepared Systems.

Finding and keeping meaningful employment is often a challenge for youth and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Underemployment is also a concern, as many individuals are employed in positions that require performance significantly below their skills, knowledge, or training. Being employed and self-sufficient financially contributes to improved self-esteem, increased independence and reduces reliance on income support programs.

The research on employment and services in Canada for those living with ASD is sparse. During our recent Ontario study of 480 youth (16+) and adults living with ASD (Stoddart et al., 2013), families and individuals with ASD shared their employment status and their experiences in the workplace. Only 13.9% of the participants 20 years and older relied on full-time employment as their primary source of income, while 6.1% relied on part-time employment. Also, the majority of people (58.2%) depended on Ontario Disability Income Supports (ODSP) as their primary source of income.

In the same study, 30% of those employed were found to be working in "sales and service occupations". This finding reflects that although individuals with ASD may not naturally have the "soft skills" to interact and function in these types of environments, these service-oriented entry-level positions are often the occupations available. "Business, finance and administration" were reported to be the primary employment fields for 15.1% of the participants.

Other studies have been conducted in the area of ASD and employment, however more research is needed on ASD-specific vocational interventions. Mawhood and Howlin (1999) in the UK studied the outcome of an ASD vocational intervention compared to a control group which did not receive ASD specific employment supports, and concluded that those in the ASD-specific group had higher salaries, worked longer, and reported more satisfaction than the control group.

A further argument on the benefits of ASD-specific vocational programs is derived from Cimera and Burgess (2011) in their review of the monetary benefits/costs of adults with ASD working in their communities in the US. This study concluded that across all states, those individuals participating in vocational programs most frequently were at a monetary benefit when considering programming costs and training.

Whether we are in the role of service providers, parents, or individuals with an ASD, our challenge is not only to increase the numbers of youth and adults with ASD who are employed, but also to ensure that they achieve long-lasting meaningful employment. .

Challenges to Accessing Employment Faced By Youth and Adults With ASD:

- Preparing for and attending an interview—difficulties managing anxiety, reading social cues, communicating appropriate information
- Social interactions with colleagues, organizational skills and sensory challenges
- The work activities required might not be perceived as challenging, rewarding or meaningful

- Colleagues and bosses' misunderstanding of the individual's behaviours and challenges
- Lack of general awareness of the strengths that an individual with ASD can bring to the workplace
- Training which does not support the individual's specific needs related to ASD and other features
- Difficulty with self-advocacy: sharing information about personal needs and accommodations

Recommendations for the Community:

- Increase employment support programs geared to individuals with ASD
- Increase training for frontline workers in generic employment agencies to better understand the strengths and needs of the ASD population
- Customize existing employment programs to better support the ASD population
- Educate employers to understand how to cultivate talents and preferences of those with ASD
- Improve transitional services at the high-school and post-secondary levels to ensure individuals are prepared to enter the workplace
- Increase research on vocational interventions specific to those with ASD to better understand and advocate for appropriate services
- Create opportunities for individuals with ASD who would like to pursue entrepreneurial activities—support with start-up costs, financial and management training, mentorship, etc.
- Increase employment coaching and support for individuals with ASD who have successfully entered the workforce, but may be struggling in their current position

Recommendations for the Individual and Family:

- Enroll in co-operative education opportunities in high school, volunteer in the community, and seek out summer employment to get experience in a variety of settings
- Enroll in programs that focus on employment, life skills, and social skills to prepare the individual for adult independence
- Connect the individual living with ASD to family and friends for informational interviews about specific jobs or careers
- Engage the individual in job-shadowing opportunities
- Develop strong self-advocacy skills so that personal strengths and needs can be communicated to the employer in an effective manner
- Begin career planning discussions as early as possible in adolescence to ensure a successful transition to the world of work
- Identify the individual's strengths, skills, interests, talents and cognitive style
- Make use of psycho-vocational testing and assessment
- Don't just look for a job, but for a job that is "the right fit" for the individual
- When self-employment is viable, evaluate the individual's talents, whether he/she has a product or service that has the potential to be sold, strengthen the individual's entrepreneurial skills, and look for small business training and mentoring

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