

### INTRODUCTION

People with autism are significantly underserved in terms of achieving employment outcomes supported by the state/federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) program. While the data available is based on a narrow definition of autism used by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), only 0.6% of all successful VR closures in 2005 were individuals with autism. The actual number of successful closures in 2005 for individuals with autism was 1,141 (Dew & Alan, 2007). A VR closure is considered successful when:

- The VR services provided under an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) substantially impacted the customer's job at the time of closure.
- The individual obtained his or her vocational goal.
- The individual maintained employment for a minimum of 90 days.

Perhaps as critical are the number of unsuccessful closures for individuals with autism and the proportion of unsuccessful closures to successful closures. In 2005, there were 1,689 unsuccessful closures with a proportion of unsuccessful to successful closures of 1.48 (1689:1141) (Dew & Alan, 2007). This data published by RSA clearly illustrates the poor employment outcomes of individuals with autism spectrum disorders in this country.

These employment outcomes are even more alarming when considering the information from a 2007 report from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The study found that 1 in 150 children in America today have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (CDC, 2007). The Autism Society of America (ASA) estimates that 1.5 million Americans and their families are now affected, costing the U.S. at least \$35 billion annually. In light of this information, employment is critical if individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are to become participating members of society.

Integrated competitive employment should be a goal for all individuals with autism who wish to work and should be the first choice offered. The current unemployment statistic may be related more to services and supports that individuals with autism do not receive. Holmes (2007) indicated that a major reason for underemployment, unemployment, and job loss of individuals with autism is a failure to determine the supports needed as well as the most effective way to design the supports. Individuals with autism can be successfully employed when the proper supports are identified, put into place, and evaluated periodically to ensure effectiveness. This fact sheet will provide information of strategies and supports that Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) can provide to assist individuals with autism in achieving integrated employment outcomes.

### INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT NEEDS AND AUTISM

Any individual has unique characteristics that will impact the type of job, which the person will need to be successfully employed. For instance, one person may do well in a job that requires a great deal of public contact while another performs best when the work setting has limited interactions with customers. This is true of individuals without disabilities as well as those who have disabilities regardless of the type or severity of the disability.

## Supporting Individuals with Autism in Integrated Community Jobs: Identifying Support Needs to Facilitate Success

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- Holmes, D. L. (2007). When the school bus stops coming: The employment dilemma for adults with autism. *Autism Advocate*, 46 (1), pp. 16-21.
- Wehman, P. Targett, P., and Young, C. (2007). Off to work for an individual with autism: A supported approach. *Autism Advocate*, 46 (1), 54-57.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

- American Autism Society of America -- <http://www.autism-society.org/>
- Autism Employment Case Study on You Tube -- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erFrlz9HNMg>
- Defining Autism - The American Autism Society of America  
[http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_what\\_is\\_characteristics](http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_what_is_characteristics)

There are some unique behavioral characteristics that are associated with autism. CRPs who want to assist individuals with autism find and maintain a job in the community, may find it useful to understand some of these unique characteristics. Remember, there will be a great deal of variability across skills, interests, and behavioral characteristics of individuals with autism. This section is presented with a caution that the employment specialist should not assume that all individuals with autism have the same support needs just because the person has autism. Getting to know each individual and his or her interests and abilities will be key to a successful employment outcome.

## Key Points

- There is no specific strategy that will work for all individuals with autism in all employment settings.
- The person with autism is an individual with unique skills and abilities as well as support needs. All people with autism are not alike.
- The employment specialist must analyze not only the characteristics of the employee, but also the characteristics of the work site and its employees.
- Information obtained in natural environments about the individual (e.g. home, restaurants, the mall, school, etc.) is generally more useful to the employment specialist versus information from segregated environments (e.g. sheltered workshop, special education classroom, etc.).
- Some characteristics displayed by individuals with autism may be beneficial in specific work settings rather than negative if the individual is matched to the right job.

## Characteristics

**Difficulty communicating:** Recognize that individuals with autism have a wide range of communication skills. Some may repeat words or phrases instead of engaging in conversation. Others may be non-verbal and yet have intellectual abilities. Assume competence rather than assuming that the individual's lack of communication is associated with cognitive limitations. For support needs related to communication, determine if an accommodation may minimize the disability.

**Strategy:** John has difficulty communicating and sometimes is not responsive when someone speaks to him. His supervisor communicates with him about his work tasks using e-mail. John does well with this strategy and also is able to ask his supervisor's and coworkers' questions using this strategy.

**Limited social skills:** Social interactions on the job have been identified as critical to job success and retention. Social skill requirements on the job can present difficulty for individuals with autism. An employment specialist will want to understand the social characteristics of the individual seeking employment as well as the social demands of any potential workplace. Some of the characteristics that may be observed are the individual's preference to being alone, aloof manner (e.g., does not smile or greet coworkers, has a fixed stare in social situations), little or no eye contact, or laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason. Individuals with autism also may have difficulty initiating or sustaining conversation with others even though the person has speech.

**Strategy:** Be sure to observe the individual's social skills and consider how matching the person to a work environment can accommodate limitations. As an example, Mary appears to be unaware of

the importance of using "social graces" in communicating with others. She can appear to be blunt or unfriendly such as not smiling or greeting coworkers when arriving at work. Matching Mary to a job where social skills are not needed, or one where the coworkers are supportive of one another would be important. With Mary's permission, the employment specialist could discuss with her coworkers that while she may seem aloof and unfriendly, this is a characteristic of her disability. A supportive work environment over time also may help Mary improve her social skills.

**Unusual behaviors:** Individuals with autism may have usual behaviors that have presented a barrier to integrated employment. For instance, an individual may insist on "sameness" in his or her work environment such as wanting all work supplies or personal belongings to be placed in a specific arrangement and becoming upset if there is a change. Another example of wanting "sameness" in the workplace might be resistance to change in routines. A person with autism might not respond or become visibly upset if a coworker or supervisor asks him or her to stop work on a regularly scheduled task to complete something new. Another unusual behavior that has typically been associated with autism is the individual engaging in repetitive movements. The person spinning objects or waving a hand in front of his or her face might characterize this behavior. Remember that each person is unique, and an individual may or may not display unusual behaviors just because he or she has autism.

**Strategy:** CRPs are advised not to limit a person's access to employment opportunities because of unusual behaviors. A good job match can minimize atypical behaviors or perhaps may even be considered strength in some work environments. For instance, the individual who requires consistency in his or her daily tasks can make an excellent employee! However, if this same person is placed in a job where there is no consistency in daily routines, it is unlikely that individual will be successful. Also consider, that as the person becomes comfortable with the workplace, behaviors may not be an issue or may decrease. For instance, the individual who makes loud noises when feeling insecure or uncertain of what is expected may over time only occasionally make loud noises. Again, a match between the person and the environment is important where simple accommodations can be made to support the individual. Example: John has a behavior in which he will clap his hands over his ears every few minutes and hum loudly. If he is able to wear headphones while working, this behavior does not interfere with his work performance.

## KEY POINTS

- Be sure to consider features of a work place, which either meet the needs of the individual's characteristics or can be adapted to support the person.
- Identify worksites that will offer minimal exposure to issues or things that have been known to contribute to behavior challenges.
- Negotiate accommodations that will address specific individual characteristics that cause barriers to employment.
- A job analysis of potential jobs should look at all issues related to environmental factors (e.g., noise, light, temperature); coworker supports (e.g., amount of available supervision, social demands of the workplace); and types of job tasks (e.g., down time, production requirements, number of job duties, routine, and job complexity.)
- Always involve the supervisor, coworkers, and the individual in the identification and the design of any workplace accommodations.