Supporting Individuals with Autism in Competitive Integrated Employment

Securing competitive integrated employment remains a challenge for many young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). While federal legislation has mandated enhanced services for transition-aged youth, via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act reauthorization (IDEIA 2004) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA 2014), many young adults with ASD still face unemployment and underemployment upon leaving secondary education settings. Despite these outcomes, competitive integrated employment should be a goal for all individuals with autism who wish to work and should be the first choice offered. High rates of unemployment may be related more to services and supports that individuals with ASD do not receive. 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 supports. Individuals with ASD 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 on strategies and supports that Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) can provide to assist individuals with autism in achieving competitive integrated employment outcomes.

Individualized Support Needs and Autism

Any individual seeking employment has unique characteristics that will impact the type of job in which they will be successfully employed. For instance, one person may do well in a job that requires a great deal of public contact while another individual performs best when the work setting has limited interactions with the public, such as customers of the business. The amount of social interaction required at a job is a personal preference that should be considered when helping a person with autism become employed.

There are some unique behavioral characteristics that are associated with autism that should be kept in mind during the employment process. CRPs who want to assist individuals with autism to secure 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 to Consider:**

- 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.
- 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, day support center, 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**

- **Communication Needs:** 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 nonverbal, but have superior 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 impact related to work.

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

- **Social Skill Needs:** Social interactions on the job have been identified as critical for job success and retention. Social skill requirements on the job can present difficulty for many 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 the potential workplace. Some of the characteristics that may be observed are the individual’s preference for being alone, an 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 obvious reason. Individuals with autism also may have difficulty initiating or sustaining conversation with others even though the person has speech. Be sure to observe the individual’s social skills and consider how matching the person to a work environment can accommodate these characteristics.

**Strategy:** 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 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 and she is in fact, not unfriendly at all. A supportive work environment over time also may help Mary learn different social skills.

- **Unusual Behaviors:** Individuals with autism may have unusual behaviors that have presented a barrier to competitive integrated employment in the past. 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. A 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. 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 even be considered a strength in some work environments.
• **Strategy:** An 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 happy or successful. Also consider that as the person becomes comfortable with the workplace, behaviors may not be an issue or may decrease. For instance, an 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. For example, Arjun 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 workplace 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.

The contents of this resource were developed under grant number H421D220004 from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. §§ 1221e-3 and 3474).