



Work Adjustment Strategies for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

The prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder makes it very likely that evaluation and career assessment professionals will work with individuals from this population. The Theory of Work Adjustment can be helpful to conceptualize factors relevant to assisting individuals with autism spectrum disorders in locating suitable employment. Further, it may be important to educate employers regarding work adjustment concepts as well. This VECAP Student Award winning article provides a discussion of autism spectrum disorder as related to work adjustment theory. The paper also provides insights that are helpful when working with potential employers.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, work adjustment, theory of work adjustment

It is estimated that nearly 1 in 44 children carry a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (The Center of Disease Control, 2021). The Center of Disease control defines Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as “a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges” (2021). As individuals on the spectrum grow up, they may need support for successful engagement in a workplace (Johnson, et al., 2020). Specifically, the workplace can demand use of social skills, i.e., the understanding of nonverbal cues, areas that can be difficult for individuals on the spectrum. The Theory of Work Adjustment aids professionals in helping individuals with Autism acclimate to the workplace (University of Minnesota, 2022).

According to The University of Minnesota, “The Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA) describes the relationship of the individual to his or her workplace environment”

(2022). The Theory of Work Adjustment illustrates the relationship between work and the employee as a symbiotic relationship. The employee performs the tasks in which the workplace benefits, and the employee benefits from compensation in pay as well as certain benefits, such as discounts and depending on the job, insurance. A maintained relationship between the employee and the workplace can only occur when both parties are performing their tasks. The University of Minnesota (2019) also summarizes work adjustment as “the process of achieving and maintaining correspondence.”

Within the next ten years, it is estimated that there will be a half a million people with Autism reaching the milestone of adulthood (Griffiths et al., 2016, p. 5). Adulthood brings independence as well as responsibilities. To pay for those responsibilities, a steady job is required. In the United States, an adult must forgo their parent’s health insurance at age twenty-six and find their own. Over 156 million Americans are on employer-based health insurance plans (O’Leary, 2021). Therefore, a full-time job with benefits is a must for many Americans. This staple of employment does not exclude people with Autism. However, people with Autism diagnoses are less likely to receive the benefits in return for the work that they do (Griffiths, et al., 2016, p. 5).

Adults with Autism experience unemployment and underemployment at higher rates than their peers without ASD (Hedley et al., 2017, p. 1). Along with their peers in the workforce, people with Autism Spectrum Disorders are both qualified and apt to gain and maintain fulfilling employment (Hendricks, 2009, p. 125). However, that can be overshadowed by the lack of understanding of social cues and other behaviors that are needed to go through life. To combat unemployment as well as underemployment, there are strategies that can be utilized by the employee.

Underemployment is a common problem among people with disabilities due to the frustration of job hunting and employer discrimination. Jumping at the first offer may be the most tempting solution when it comes to finding a job, but employment should have purpose. It is immensely important to find an employment match where the employee and workplace mesh together well. “Job placement [needs] to be individualized and based on the person’s strengths and interests” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 128). Job prospects need to be appropriate for the intellectual and cognitive abilities of the employee. “Experience has proven that with proper intervention and training, individuals with ASD can work in a variety of businesses and industries” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 129). Supported employment agencies can help people with Autism Spectrum Disorders flourish in the workplace by teaching the client everything they need to know about workplace etiquette along with giving the client objectives to reach. According to Hendricks (2009):

These objectives include the worker with ASD: understands his or her job tasks; can complete all job tasks to the satisfaction of his or her supervisor; understands all workplace rules; knows the start time, end time and break times; understands sick leave and vacation policies; is aware of emergency procedures; knows his or her way to pivotal areas in the building and knows how to get to and from work (p. 129).

In addition to supports from an agency, disclosure of an Autism Spectrum Disorder to an employer may be beneficial. Barbara Bissonnette (n.d.) suggests that “the best approach is to develop a personalized plan based on the many factors that affect employment outcomes.” Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers are required to provide accommodations if the circumstances require it. According to Bissonnette (n.d.), it is important to “keep your statement short, simple and to the point.” It is recommended for the employee to document how their different abilities manifest in the workplace as well as accommodations that would best serve them. Then they have a foundation to start a conversation with their employer. (Bisonette, n.d.).

Conversations should be an ongoing event in the workplace with someone that the employee with an ASD trusts. Molly Sullivan (n.d.) suggests “identifying a supportive person in the workplace who can act as a mentor for confusing situations and day-to-day questions.” This mentor can be found with the help of a superior or a human resources representative. However, both employees should agree on the mentorship. In addition to having a constant mentor to navigate the work environment, “being a good self-advocate” (Sullivan, n.d.) is imperative to vocational success and a rapport with coworkers and superiors.

Strategies for Employers of Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders

“Both knowledge of the disorder as well as job supports available are important prerequisites for employing individuals on the spectrum” (Hendricks, 2009, p. 129). Social inclusion among co-workers is also paramount for success. Effective and direct communication is key when collaborating with employees who have Autism Spectrum Disorders. Direct statements such as, “Please begin your work on the database assignment’ and ‘Please meet us in the cafeteria at 12:00 p.m. if you would like to eat lunch with us’” (Rowe & Ackles, n.d.) are most effective because there is nothing left up to interpretation. Both statements provide exact directions which will help the employee know what is expected. It is also ideal to “put instructions in writing and follow up your verbal instructions with an email” (Rowe & Ackles, n.d.) for utmost retention.

According to Rowe and Ackles (n.d.), it is best to “avoid any indirect patterns of speech, including clichés, implied meanings and idioms.” These statements can confuse employees with ASD’s and in turn, impede their vocational and social progress. Therefore, it is best to just give statements with the information necessary. It is good to brief other employees on this as well for a most inclusive environment.

In addition to verbal interpretation, nonverbal interpretation can prove difficult for individuals with ASD’s in the workplace. Therefore, Rowe and Ackles (n.d.) suggest to use words primarily to communicate. As opposed to sitting in silence to conclude a one on onemeeting, it is suggested for a superior to use a statement such as, “Now that our meeting is over, I need you to return to your work station now because we have work to complete” (Rowe & Ackles, n.d.).

Strategies of Coworkers of Employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Collaboration with coworkers in vocational and social aspects will help employees with Autism Spectrum Disorders flourish to the best of their abilities. According to William Purdy (2018), “The first and most important thing that anybody can understand about ASD is that the people living with it are, just like everybody else, individual in their personalities and dispositions.” Changing the mentality about ASD’s as well as other learning and intellectual differences can foster an environment of inclusion and acceptance in the workplace. Every person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder is different. They, like their neurotypical counterparts, have preferences and “pet peeves.” “Few people on the spectrum will ask for anything extreme when they interact with you” (Purdy, 2018). Employees with these differences have experience and skills to bring to the table and they should be treated as such. A lunch invitation extended to everyone should also be extended to an employee with an ASD.

Discussion

Since Autism Spectrum Disorders are on a wide spectrum, there is no “one size fits all” approach to workplace accommodations. That is why these employees need to have their accommodations tailored to them case by case. Even though there are a plethora of lists stating tips and tricks, such as having “headphones or earplugs to reduce sound levels” or “social stories for the workplace” (Standifer, pg. 41, 2009), it seems that the best action to take regardless of the case is to foster an environment of understanding. Asking the individual what they need is more effective than just assuming that they will not understand idioms or common jokes.

To foster understanding, Autism awareness as well as sensitivity training should be given to all employees and supervisors (Streeby, pg. 25, n.d.). Given the increase in Autism diagnoses, everyone may know at least one person with the cognitive difference. However, knowing one person with an ASD does not make an Autism Spectrum Disorder expert. A rapport between a job coach, an employee with an ASD and the supervisor is always the best bet.

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About the Author

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