Identifying Employment Opportunities and Providing Support

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Between 1997 and 2011, the unemployment rate of those diagnosed with disabilities has ranged from 72% to 88%. This is an astounding number of persons with disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), specifically, without a job. Despite the enthusiasm, motivation, and desire many so many individuals with ASD have in their will to work, many workplaces are hesitant to take the risk to support them, or lack the knowledge on how to support them in an employment setting. Supported employment is the opportunity for individuals with disabilities to be integrated in a working environment with the necessary supports to be successful. “The purpose of supported employment is to assist individuals with disabilities in becoming and remaining competitively employed in integrated work settings” (Wehman, Revell & Brooke, 2003, p. 167).

Flatow (1997) has argued that businesses should employ a team approach in determining workplace accommodations. Workplace supports can often times be either formal or informal. An informal workplace support evolves organically, and out of the daily workplace activities and routines, such as a co-worker assisting another employee with completing a task, or setting a watch alarm to prompt when to take a break. A formal support is typically a company-sponsored program, like an employee assistance program (Unger, 1999).

According to Unger (1999), the roles of supervisors and co-workers are instrumental to the success of people with disabilities in the workplace. Support is essential in the following areas: learning how to complete tasks and regular job duties, how to perform infrequent duties associated with the position, learning how to complete novel tasks and assignments, taking lunch and other breaks, etc. Unger’s research determined that success was ensued with the proper training and support in place to help those with disabilities in the workforce.

Examples of Supported Employment

A company in Guildford, CT, called Roses for Autism, trains, hires and provides other employment opportunities for older students and adults on the autism spectrum. According to Tomaino (2011), Roses for Autism enables participants to engage in numerous facets of business, including marketing, shipping, inventory management, data entry, website maintenance, opportunities from receiving and fulfilling orders and customer service. Informal supports include prompting, reminders, advice and/or guidance, while formal supports include an employment specialist.

Organizations like Roses for Autism are proof and inspiration that success can happen when proper supports are in place. Students on the autism spectrum can be productive, valued employees of many corporations. Companies need to apply such supports so that more individuals with autism get the opportunity to be successful in the workplace.

Interventions: Forming an Alliance in a New Workplace

What are some of the necessary steps to support individuals on the spectrum in a workplace less prepared than the example above? Focus is required in addressing and identifying current obstacles already existing for individuals with ASD within the job market. Further, the implementation of key strategies for an employee’s integration into a new workplace, and how to effectively manage and encourage new growth and participation in such a work environment once hired, is integral. As future employers continue to become educated on disability in the workplace, vocational advocates and coaches can provide a crucial and highly empowering service in aiding, organizing, and acclimating individuals with ASD to the world of work.

Obstacles faced by job-seeking participants with ASD have been grouped into four major categories: Mastering the job application process, acclimating to new job routines, communication, and lastly, navigating social interactions with supervisors and co-workers (Muller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, n.d.). Some individuals report difficulties in creating a professional resume, while others face difficulties in job interviewing and phone contact and follow up, and report a generalized feeling of being overwhelmed throughout the entire job application process. With these struggles in mind, a vocational coach or “job coach” can assist in making such processes seem less arduous. Creating tools and strategies before the job search can help differentiate an individual’s work strengths, as they are needed in a current job market. Such assessment tools include: An identification of niche career interest, personality type, sensory sensitivities, and intervention needs in the practice of social skills, eye gaze, greetings, introductions and interviewing techniques (Johnston-Tyler, n.d.). Synthesizing how an individual’s unique talents, interests, and needs align with current occupations through job matching, is a great means for approaching the job search in a way that is career-minded, well defined, and ultimately, rewarding. Johnston-Tyler’s suggestions to develop an “elevator pitch” of job interests, revise resumes, practice interviewing techniques and build networking skills are fundamentals which not only familiarize an individual on the spectrum with their own abilities, but encourage the self-determination and self-advocacy so vital to a burgeoning work environment during career development.

An important consideration for an employee with ASD is the individual’s decision of whether or not to disclose a disability and request accommodations. These decisions require asking big-picture questions. Assessing an individual on the spectrum’s adaptability to a “neurotypical” workplace and, conversely, assessing a “neurotypical” workplace’s adaptability and tolerance of the needs of a “neurodiverse” employee, is precisely the area in which so many work environments fail to evaluate. These conversations are ones that take time and patience on both sides, and mark the beginning of a nuanced and unique consideration of an employee with ASD to the work environment. Career counselors can provide essential support in communicating work areas of difficulty, such as: social communication, sensory sensitivities, processing and organizational abilities, and behavior management. Similarly, identifying if and where an employer shows themselves fit for demonstrating acceptance of diversity, providing non-management tracks for promotion of technical workers, focusing on merit as a primary criteria for promotion, allowing flexibility in work hours, ability to telecommute, and outlining consistency in daily job duties and schedules can provide immeasurable relief and clear understanding for a newly hired employee (Johnston-Tyler, n.d.). Again, clear communication plays pivotal importance in outlining a positive and successful work experience for an individual with ASD. Habitation for these individuals can require extended time periods for adapting to new routines and experiences. Allowing ample time to become accustomed to work life, to prioritizing new work tasks, committing goals, and schedules require open understanding between both employer and employee. While many times these conversations are newly traversed territories for both parties, it is through sustained compassion, patience, and clearly relayed information that misunderstandings may be avoided, and new career achievements attained.

After acquiring any new position, the difference between the career success or churn of employees with ASD is often times the difference between the career success or churn of employees with ASD. Support is instrumental to the success of people with disabilities in becoming and remaining competitively employed in integrated work settings (Unger, 1999).

Reviewing a workplace’s daily expectations, scheduled meetings, dress code, deadlines, and appointments can do so much to elucidate what often can appear to be a “grey area” for employees with ASD. This can provide unbounded relief in the journey toward individual self-determination and self-advocacy. With such communication tools in hand, an employee can grow familiar within work environments for indefinite amounts of time, mitigating the looming misunderstandings and miscommunications that so often result in a negative work experience. Indeed, mentorships and other such relationships can do so much to align individuals on the spectrum with the career trajectories and framework they seek to thrive in (Muller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, n.d.).

While negative autism in the workplace has in the past proved a daunting affair, new educational materials, information and supports are being created all the time. There are a variety of means to enhance the job life of an individual with ASD, all of which serve to foster a communicative, tolerant, and profitable work environment. As is the case with all of us, what is of most importance in addressing autism in the workplace is to attend to what we all aim to cultivate: a clear and practiced awareness of the self that can transcend any work or business obstacle that lies ahead. In the clear considering and communicating of where an individual with ASD can excel in the workforce, how they have been and in what timeframe, provides that individual with indispensable building blocks for constructing a life that satisfactorily and consistently meets the needs of themselves and the co-workers around them.

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References


