

THE EQUITY TOOLKIT FOR THE WORKPLACE



Autism Alliance of Canada



Alliance canadienne de l'autisme

READY
WILLING
& ABLE



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EN MATIÈRE D'AUTISME

Reflective stories and exercises to help create an inclusive environment for Autistic employees

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1.0 Introduction

The following poem is a declaration from an individual on the autism spectrum to participate and grow in an equitable work force. Many of those on the spectrum share these same thoughts, even if not voiced. It's an invitation to employers to participate as well in the growth and well-being of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) and the workplace. Your business will be more cohesive and productive with addition of people of the same mind.

I Am Ready

I am ready. Are you?
I am willing. Are you?
I am able. Are you?

I am all these things and more
Capable, honest, trustworthy,
Hard-working, loyal,
Willing to learn, to grow, to flourish.

Teach me, work with me
Learn with me and grow with me.
Together we'll make a difference.

I Am Ready, Terri Robson, 2021

1.1 Language Statement

At the Canadian Journal of Autism Equity (CJAE), our goal is amplifying autistic voices and getting them to the attention of researchers, academics, and other policy makers. To that end, we do not impose or enforce a specific language standard on people writing about their experiences. We realize that many in the autistic community may have a preference for certain types of referential language, like identity-first language ('autistic' person) compared to person-first language (person with autism), and that there is also controversy within the autistic community around use of certain terms relating to older diagnostic terms that have been adopted by some in the autistic community ('aspie'). We also understand that there are different beliefs within the autistic community as to which language standards are 'correct'. We feel that to try and impose a language standard upon other peoples' experience and how they refer to themselves would undermine their autonomy and their self-determination. Therefore, we do not prescribe any particular language standard regarding referential language as it relates to submissions wherein autistic authors are referring to their own experiences as we want to amplify their voices, not replace their voices with the voices of others.

1.2 How was This Toolkit Developed?

This toolkit was informed by the Canadian Journal of Autism Equity, CJAE, a powerful collection of stories and perspectives from Autistic Canadians, highlights the current inequities and challenges faced in the workplace. This toolkit was developed for employers and is guided by themes elicited from CJAE. These themes were found with a thematic analysis conducted by two of the journals' editors. CJAE is an Autistic-led journal that publishes writings from Autistic people in Canada. The development of this toolkit was done by the Autism Alliance of Canada (AAC) and funded by Ready Willing and Able. Autism Alliance of Canada is a national alliance working together for the rights of Autistic people and their families. We address priority issues that Autistic persons and their loved ones face across the lifespan. We do this by facilitating dialogue, advancing research, and working with governments to develop and implement a National Autism Strategy.

The narrative walking us through this toolkit is written from the perspective of Terri Robson, whose preferred identity language is person-first language and who identifies as an Aspie. The quotes were unedited to reflect each authors' preferred identity language and authenticity. If interested in more information and/or the original articles check out the journal at www.cjae.ca

1.3 What is the Equity Toolkit for the Workplace?

The equity toolkit for the workplace is a tool designed to give employers first-hand insight on equitable practices, and effective accommodation strategies for Autistic people. Typically, when making workplace accommodations, invisible disabilities such as ASD's are often overlooked or misunderstood. Using this toolkit, I, Terri Robson, will walk you through the themes with quotes taken directly from the journal, woven with my personal stories, challenges for you to reflect upon, as well as recommendations and actions for you to take on how to make your workplace more equitable.

1.4 What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

An Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects how an individual perceives and interacts with the world around them. It can affect one's ability to communicate with others both verbally and non-verbally and how they interpret sensory information such as auditory, visual, and tactile stimuli. In short, Autistic people have brains that are "wired" differently than non-autistic/neurotypical people, meaning they process information differently. Additionally, autism exists on a spectrum, meaning there exists much diversity in the ways Autistic people may process the same information. Thus, people on the spectrum will require different levels of support, highlighting the need to support Autistic people on the individual level rather than a one size fits all approach.

1.5 What is Equity?

For this toolkit, equity is defined as individually supported equality of opportunity, meaning everyone has the opportunity to succeed within their field. It is essential to recognize that in an equitable environment, some people may require different accommodations to be given the opportunity to succeed. For example, imagine two new employees going through training; the first employee is a tactile learner, while the second prefers learning from manuals and books. In an equitable environment, each employee should be trained in their preferred manner so that everyone is given the opportunity to succeed in their new role. However, it is important to remember that equity does not mean equality of outcome, i.e., meeting diversity quotas; people should continue to be evaluated based on merit and qualifications.



Equality



Equity

1.6 Objectives of the Toolkit:

- Gain first-hand insight on equitable practices
- Gain first-hand insight on effective accommodation strategies from people who truly want and deserve equity in the workplace
- Gain insight into personal difficulties faced by individuals on the spectrum as they relate to equity in the workplace
- Gain insight into social and institutional barriers faced by individuals on the spectrum as they relate to equity in the workplace
- View benefits of equitable hiring from a variety of individual perspectives
- Explore legal language surrounding equitable hiring
- Examine and determine which actions, when implemented, will benefit employers, and by extension, other employees
- Review and implement approaches used by parents to prepare individual for work
- Examine and maximize the role of parents in support in support of individual preparing for work

2.0 Personal Difficulties

As suggested in the theme title, this topic interests all individuals with ASDs. While we may have similar experiences, good and not so good, they affect each of us differently. The impact of these difficulties can go a long way to determining the length of our current job and length of tenure in the job market over a lifetime.

My difficulties, frustrating and many as there were, induced me to improve and work even harder. These difficulties were hard to overcome, as oftentimes, I was not made aware of the issue(s) and the resulting problems. Yet I continued to work, until the stress became too much, from too many jobs at which I did not succeed, over a relatively short period of time. This experience ultimately led to a breakdown that affected me for 4-5 years. Luckily, I had my own company at this time; it was my saving grace.

2.1 How These Difficulties Manifest in the Workplace

These personal difficulties transfer themselves to the workplace and the relationship with the employer and co-workers. Expectations for all parties may be poles apart unless an explanation is provided to each element of the workplace. Miscommunication can lead to hurt feelings, thus exacerbating an already tense situation.

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that results in challenges in communication and social interaction skills, in addition to the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities.¹

I saw him go through mental breakdowns where he misinterpreted what someone said or missed out on someone's body language, or in times where others misunderstood him.²

ask a lot of questions for clarification²

To ask for help – it's a sign of strength, not weakness.²

I was never given the opportunity to show people, let alone myself, what a good teacher I can be.³

Aspies, as a rule, see things very black and white.³

is a social-communication disorder. Approximately 95% of communication in the world is non-verbal. People with AS and other communication disorders do not "get" non-verbals.³

my condition manifested first as anxiety and an obsessive need for order. I worried too much about too many things. My desperate need to control the world around me often ended in abject failure.⁴

1 Au 2022

2 Priddle 2022

3 Robson 2022

4 Winter 2021

3.0 Social and Institutional Barriers

Personal barriers aside, individuals on the spectrum face social and institutional barriers that are as diverse as the individuals themselves.

3.1 What are Social Barriers in the Workplace?

Social barriers are external influences that occur because one group believes they are superior and better than others. Social barriers manifest as discriminatory behaviors under the guise of compassion, as coworkers may assume that person is less capable, exclude them from social events or avoid the person altogether out of fear of saying the wrong thing. These behaviors create a challenging work environment for the employee that hinders their ability to grow socially and professionally with the company and their coworkers.

3.2 What are Institutional Barriers in the Workplace?

An institutional barrier is an intentionally established rule or practice that repeatedly and regularly puts a specific group of people with a common feature or trait at a disadvantage versus others. What acts as an institutional barrier for one may be less of a barrier or non-existent for others.

3.3 What is Intersectionality?

Another hurdle that should be addressed is that of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a term used to describe an individual with multiple identities (such as social, ethnic, spiritual, and other types of identities) experiences them in tandem. “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” These words, spoken by Audre Lorde, capture the essence of intersectionality.⁵

Autistics can also commonly have co-occurring diagnoses. Currently, there are 16 common co-occurring diagnoses, including but not limited to anxiety, ADHD, depression, and sleep problems.⁶ These diagnoses are complicated and can have other social and institutional barriers that must also be acknowledged. Often it can be difficult for the individual to overcome these barriers, let alone ask an employer to do so. However, by conversing, co-operating, and implementing solutions, employment leads to professional and personal fulfillment, an improved work environment, better work relationships, and a more productive workplace.

These barriers include but are not limited to traditional hiring and interviewing processes, insufficient employer support on the job, misunderstandings due to different communication styles, stigma and discrimination (Baranger et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2017).⁷

The underemployment of autistic individuals is not due to a lack of willingness to work, but rather, the lack of appropriate supports⁷

Considering the difficulties procuring a job, the problems are compounded exponentially when looking the long-term goal of finding a career you love. If you’re and able to communicate all your needs, compromise on the smaller things and keep an open line of communication, the difficulty lessens. It is possible to have a fulfilling career, but it takes hard work and perseverance.⁷

5 Gharib 2022

6 Raising Children Network 2021

7 Au 2022

The job developer worried it wouldn't be suitable for me since she thought autistic people have a hard time with chaos.⁸

Secondly, I think the whole issue of disclosure is full of pitfalls – for both the new employee/interviewee and the employer. When one has an invisible disability like ASD if you disclose during your interview chances are the phone won't ring for a callback; if you are fortunate to get hired, when do you inform about your disability? After your probation? What if you need a few simple accommodations to make you succeed but don't want to ask for them in case you are being singled out?⁸

When to disclose is kind of a shot in the dark. As mentioned previously, disclosing during the interview may prevent the opportunity for the conversation to progress any further. Sometimes as employer will ask about the details of your disability if they've been informed before hand. This typically makes it easier. Sometimes it is best to wait until you've been employed for a while. I believe this is a necessary step enabling co-workers and the opportunity to see and judge your work style and ethic.⁸

Allowing persons with ASDs the chance to make mistakes is crucial. But those mistakes must be addressed right away, so as to not further compound them . If we are not made aware the mistakes, we will continue to make them. If understanding the directions or relevant changes, disclosure may be necessary.⁸

I wasn't told what my mistakes were. How does one fix a problem if they don't know what it is?⁹

levels of unemployment and underemployment for those with ASD is scandalously high¹⁰

too few individuals are given a fair shake in both the hiring process and the workplace once hired¹⁰

less likely than any other disability group to be employed or pursue post-secondary education¹⁰

tell the employer any special accommodations she will need from them¹⁰

professional and employment literature ignores one other area of work that many with ASD, me included, have excelled: teaching at all levels¹⁰

A British study commissioned by the Office for National Statistic suggests that as many as 78% of adults with autism are underemployed or unemployed. (National Autism Society, 2021)¹⁰

An American study finds relatively similar data to the British research when they conclude that 85% of Americans with ASD are underemployed or unemployed. (Sparrow, 2018) The American research also indicates that only 53% of young adults with ASD have worked for pay outside the home in the first eight years following high school. (Ciccocioppo and Taylor, 2018)¹⁰

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4.0 Employer Benefits

One might wonder if there are any benefits to having a developmental disability. You certainly wouldn't think so with many of the difficulties shown above. It is impossible to make a complete list of adversities: as each individual is very different from the other, so are their difficulties. Benefits are like adversities; it would be impossible to list them all. What is a benefit to some may not be present in others. Among the benefits are persistence, loyalty, attention to detail, and a strong work ethic. You will see these traits listed within the quotes from the various articles. The list is by no means complete. Like individuals without developmental disabilities, the list of benefits would be enormous to encompass them all.

As an individual with an ASD, I was asked what I thought was a blessing/benefit. At first, I was quite indignant. What kind of blessing could there possibly be when you've just been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome and the five co-occurring conditions I have. I spent some more time thinking about it. One of my gifts (if you want to call it that) is that I can speak about ASDs without talking about my special interest ad nauseum. I can present information about growing up without a diagnosis, provide indicators of certain behaviors in the workplace and provide tips and tools to help employers and employees deal with many hurdles in the workplace. So, in essence, I give a voice to those thousands of individuals with an ASD that cannot articulate the disorder for themselves. Upon further reflection, I decided there was a benefit to it after all.

*reliable, persistent, technically able, attentive to detail, logical, conscience, loyal and honest*¹¹

*better work ethics and performing better at tasks requiring attention to detail*¹¹

*diverse ways of thinking, permitting them to be innovative in their work, resulting in their popularity among tech companies.*¹¹

*Another one of the benefits is the ability to think in a different manner than many others around us. As a result, many a unique solution to a difficult problem has been found? Developed? By an individual (s) with ASD. In fact, many people with ASDs are drawn to working at tech firms where the ability to hyper focus, coupled with the opportunity to utilize other strengths and determine a unique and strategic outcome are very appealing.*¹¹

*improved staff retention and therefore reduced resources spent on recruitment and training, as well as helping the department meet its employment equity targets for employees with disabilities.*¹¹

*improving retention rates, bring in new approaches to work which may result in improvements for everyone, and enrich their workforces, helping them become higher achieving organizations that are more nimble and agile. It would also help make them models among public sector organizations and show that it they not only provide funding and support for those on the spectrum, but are also employers of choice for those on the spectrum.*¹¹

*I am very creative, am able to problem-solve in my own unique ways, and can focus well on independent tasks.*¹²

*diverse thinking and problem solving*¹³

*As you can see, many of the quotes show a similar theme: diverse thinking, unique problem-solving skills, loyalty, creativity, and the ability to focus. This list is not all inclusive. There are benefits for all individuals entering the workforce, be they tangible or intangible. Suffice it to say, the hiring of an individual with an ASD can be highly beneficial to your company.*¹³

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5.0 Employer Actions

Actions an employer must take to support individuals on the Autism Spectrum may seem really daunting at first. However, all is not as it seems. Rarely is it necessary to build ramps, widen doorways, and find new and creative ways to help a person do the small important tasks that lead to the business running more smoothly and efficiently. The types of supports and actions that must be taken are sometimes more of the intangible variety.

It may be as simple as providing a mentor for the employee while he learns the job. It may be as complex as creating an atmosphere of acceptance for the new employee with an ASD. Much of the intangibles can be covered by training, for the employer and other members of the company at large. You may even wish to provide training for the entire staff. One of the training modules should be on autism spectrum disorders. After all, one must understand the reasons for a potential problem before it arises, and solutions can be determined. Something, perhaps a smell or sound, may trigger an ASD employee, and what do you do. The same way you solve a problem around a product or customer issue should be the way we solve problems for those with ASDs.

As you'll see, one of the almost insurmountable difficulties is the job interview itself. Imagine, if you will, being in a situation where your interviewer is behind a wall speaking in a monotone voice. What types of communication will be easily understandable? The answer is none. No vocal nuances, no facial expressions, and no body language. Can you imagine the difficulties this presents? Yet this is the challenge an individual with ASD faces at each interview. Approximately 95% of communication in the world is non-verbal. Those with social-communication disorders do not "get" non-verbals. It makes for challenging interviews. It is not necessary for me to provide examples of actions employers should take. This portion is handled very well by the authors of the individual articles.

5.1 Adjusting the Job Acquisition Process

The traditional job application process is full of ambiguity and uncertainty that may not be as accessible to Autistic people. This section aims to allow employers to identify areas within their application, interview, and onboarding processes that inadvertently discourage Autistic candidates.

5.1.1 Application Process

The application process is the first milestone for any employment opportunity; these positions are typically advertised on websites, billboards, or social media. While this may be an effective way to reach a broad audience, one must consider the accessibility of these job postings. It is important to recognize that Autistic people may have trouble accessing these materials if they are unclear in the qualifications requested, overstimulating, or incompatible with assistive technologies such as screen-readers. To address issues concerning accessibility, employers need to educate themselves about Autism and develop standards for accessibility within their company practices. Additionally, providing a space for people to disclose their disability status in the application process and reinforcing a commitment to inclusive hiring practices can significantly ease the anxiety many applicants face as they are unsure how employers may react to this information. However, it is important to recognize that as an employer you are **not** permitted to ask about their disability status but providing them with a safe space to do so in the application process is a healthy first step that helps ease the anxiety of many potential applicants.

Things to consider...

Is the job posting presented in a straightforward manner?

Are you giving applicants the space to disclose their disability status, if they choose to do so?

Are you clear of what bearing, if any, this may have on their application status?

5.1.2 Interview Process

The interview is the next major hurdle faced by Autistic applicants as there is a lot of nuance and uncertainty that comes with an interview invitation. To resolve this, employers should be as clear and forthright as possible when providing the candidate with an interview, providing them details on who will be present, the style of the interview, and what accommodations are available (e.g., providing the questions in writing, limiting the number of interviewers, allowing a job mentor or support person to sit in on the interview). This creates an ideal environment for both the employer and employee. It provides the candidate with the resources necessary to present their best selves, giving the employer a more holistic view of the applicant's skills and qualifications. Another aspect of the interview process employers may want to reflect upon is the style of the interview and the nature of the questions asked. A traditional interview whereby abstract scenarios or simulations are presented to the candidate may not be accessible to Autistic applicants nor an effective means of evaluating a candidate's ability. As noted in Kevin Au's piece, the introduction of a working interview, where candidates perform the duties that would be part of the job, was crucial in determining whether the position was right for them. While this type of interview may not be possible for certain industries, it nonetheless provides applicants the opportunity to put their skills on display that may go unnoticed in a traditional interview.

Things to consider...

Are the interview questions presented in a straightforward way?

Are simulations of abstract scenarios the best way to evaluate a candidate's ability?

5.1.3 Onboarding Processes and Accommodations

The final hurdle highlighted in CJAE is the onboarding process. A significant difficulty highlighted in these stories is ambiguity in their roles and responsibilities for the company. This issue can be addressed by providing clear directions, workplace accommodations, and an apparent willingness to learn and ask questions. A common support highlighted in CJAE is the inclusion of a job mentor to assist with the training process. This can take the form of peer employees or supervisors who take extra time during their shift to ensure they successfully fulfill their role, provide clear step-by-step instructions, or provide constructive feedback.

Additionally, employers and staff should take the initiative to ask questions and understand the accommodations needed for each individual whether that be the need to wear noise-canceling headphones, having access to a quiet room to work if the office is too chaotic, or ensuring that lights aren't flickering in the employee's workspace to best address the sensory symptoms of autism. While not all accommodations are easy to implement, taking the time to understand your employee's needs and create an environment where they can excel is in the best interest of both parties. This is evident as data has shown that when accommodations are met, Autistic employees have a lower turnover rate than other employees and are recognized for their honesty and loyalty.

5.2 List of Example Accommodations (this list is not all-inclusive)

- Clear, understandable ads that can be viewed by all forms of media, including assistive technology
- Provide a space to disclose during the application process, if they choose to do so and ensuring a commitment to inclusive hiring
- Provide different options for interviews
(e.g., practical work demonstration versus an abstract "what if" question)
- Use only one interviewer; possibly record sessions for others in management to view
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Willingness of both parties to listen and learn
- Use of a peer mentor
- Clear step-by-step instructions
- Constructive feedback after completion of task; the time spent on this can be reduced as employee becomes familiar with and adept at new task
- Give the employee the option to wear noise cancelling headphones
- Availability to a quiet room
- Ensure no flickering lights

5.3 Onboarding Tool: Task Breakdown Road trip (full tool in Appendix II)

The purpose of this tool is to assist with the onboarding and training processes by providing employers with a guide on how to provide clear directions for Autistic employees, using a road trip as an analogy.

1. Identifying the Desired Task/Destination
2. Identifying the best way to convey this information/figuring out the best means of travel
3. Task breakdown/Navigation
4. Checking in

As with any new idea, it is a process that can feel overwhelming. Fear not; follow the toolkit and consider the following. One of the first steps (or the first step) is gathering input from the employee and identifying the necessary accommodations. The next step is to break down the accommodation into manageable actions using the task breakdown tool. Implement these tasks, and the impact may surprise you. Your employees with ASD will feel supported and motivated to work efficiently and productively, which can benefit others and the company. Investing time and money into providing accommodations creates a sense of belonging, pride, and loyalty that can be contagious for all employees. Some of your neuro-typical employees may also benefit from the accommodations resulting in less staff turnover and training, saving the company time and money.

6.0 Employee Approaches

There are many approaches an employee can take to ask for and receive accommodations. The most effective means to obtain these accommodations is to disclose that you are on the Autism Spectrum and explain what that means for you and the employer. It is important to remember that this disclosure not only helps create a better work environment for yourself but also helps the employer promote and increase his current business and potential opportunities. However, it is important to recognize that disclosure is the sole choice of the employee and can be very difficult or even unfeasible for some people. Nevertheless, even without disclosure of your disability, it is still possible to receive accommodations from your employer by engaging in a healthy and respectful conversation about your needs in the workplace.

6.1 Employment Support Programs

There are programs available that provide grant money to help with the initial and some ongoing costs associated with the employment of a person with ASD. Some of those programs are listed in our tool kit.

- Youth with Disabilities Summer Employment Opportunity (YwDSEO)
- LiveWorkPlay placements
- Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities

6.2 Employee Strategies

Alternatively, one of the ways to avoid potential problems is to do as I did and start your own company. There is no one to have to explain the difficulties to, no potential to be hurtful or rude to another employee and virtually no opportunity to create an atmosphere of disharmony because training for understanding is not needed.

Other approaches the employee can use are note-taking – for step-by-step instructions; use of a peer mentor and job coach; visual aids for tasks requiring multiple steps; asking questions for clarification; and answering similar questions from the employer. This list is not inclusive of all approaches an employee can use to fulfill his position. It is important to remember that ultimately the employee wants to do his best for the company to fulfill the needs of its employers and customers alike. As an employee, it is important to take a balanced approach to both your needs and those of the company. While your needs are important and should be dealt with, helping the company become a more productive, viable entity is the ultimate goal.

new guides on inclusive assessment methods and advance diverse interview boards¹⁴

recruitment initiative Youth with Disabilities Summer Employment Opportunity (YwDSEO)¹⁴

dedicating hiring processes¹⁴

LiveWorkPlay placements¹⁴

Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities¹⁴

Ready, Willing and Able initiative¹⁴

working interview, where candidates performed the duties that would be part of the job instead of simulations or tests, which helped determine right fit for the position¹⁴

managers and employees also completed training on autism in the workplace and integrated best practices for employment supports¹⁴

During my first month of training my job mentors were very helpful. Job mentors were my peer employees who took extra time and effort to make sure I was successful at my job. The job coaches were from the supportive employment program and they provided a bit of training for the job mentors as well as for me. For instance, they made a special pocketbook that contained instructions for my job, step by step. The tasks were listed in the proper order, with pictures and words, and perfectly organized.¹⁵

I was mentored by a compassionate editor, who besides having radio experience, had lots of patience to show me the ropes.¹⁵

Don't be ignorant. Take some time, ask questions, learn to do things a different way to help the autistic person with transitions and new information.¹⁵

Think "outside the box" and apply for the job¹⁵

Accommodations I require in sports are having instructions clearly explained and broken down into small steps. I also need someone to show me how to do the activities or tasks properly the first time. I usually need some of the activities modified as my balance is not always the best.¹⁶

I found that volunteering was a great way to give back to organizations that had given to me, at the same time as growing my knowledge and skills as a future employee.¹⁶

ask my employer for accommodations¹⁶

discuss my needs and goals so they were able to match me with a job coach that can support my unique needs and personality¹⁶

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These hiring experts recommend that interview skills need to be role played. Candidates need to be taught how to position their bodies, actively listen, and how to become comfortable asking and being asked open-ended questions in an interview.¹⁷

With commitment and preparation by both individuals and their support networks, meaningful and fulfilling work is more possible all the time.¹⁷

concerned that people would react poorly to her sharing¹⁷

Accommodations will vary from employee to employee and may include the need to wear noise cancelling headphones, have access to a quiet room to work if the office is too chaotic, or ensuring that lights aren't flickering in the employee's workspace to best address the sensory symptoms of autism.¹⁷

try to give me a warning of changes ahead of time¹⁷

7.0 Role of Caregivers

The role of the parent(s) in preparing a person with an ASD for the workforce is no small task. Parental involvement could mean a successful outcome or a complete disaster. I believe parental involvement is necessary for all individual development areas, not just job preparation. As stated by a couple of the authors, their parents helped by finding their first job. Teaching your child responsibility early is a key factor in developing a mature, more self-reliant adult. After all, most parents want their children to lead a life of fulfillment that may include a place in the workforce. Teaching a child to keep a neat, tidy room and to pick up after themselves leads to an adult employee to whom an orderly workspace is essential. It also helps keep them on task and fulfilling their job duties if they are not constantly looking for items necessary to complete the job at hand. Employers also appreciate a business that is professional looking for its customers.

What we teach our children remains with them for life. Suppose we teach them responsibility, the necessity of caring for oneself, and the ability to make a valuable contribution to themselves, their family, and society. In that case, they will continue with these habits and ideas into adulthood. These are transferable skills to the workplace. Other employees, customers, and, ultimately, the business itself is a recipient of these skills and the ability to help promote change and acceptance in the workplace.

involved in a program that helped autistic teens prepare for the workforce.¹⁸

This first job didn't just happen. My mom was instrumental in helping create the supported employment program. She sat on the Board of Directors of the agency offering the program and then used that as leverage to bring the program to my rural town. Another example of her acting as my advocate.¹⁸

role played by the individual's parents/caregivers in preparing them for the world of work¹⁹

What have they modeled for children about the importance of work?¹⁹

expected to help at home¹⁹

They were both very supportive and encouraged me in every way they could.¹⁹

My son with ASD was brought up in a world where not working because of his condition was never spoken of¹⁹

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8.0 What This Means for Employers

Employers, this guide is for you. Hiring and working with individuals who live with Autism Spectrum Disorders can be very trying and hard to manage at times. Yet the rewards are tremendous for both parties. Persons with ASDs are capable, honest, trustworthy, hard-working, loyal, willing to learn, to grow, and to flourish. We get a job we can be proud of and set personal and professional goals to work toward. This, in turn, improves our quality of life, leading us to work harder and better. I always look for opportunities to improve so the company may benefit from my presence as a member of the team. Our differences provide an opportunity for other staff, and the employer to learn and grow as well. This, in turn, may lead to company growth in its field. Every company I've worked for has wanted to become stronger and grow, either within the organization or outside of it.

We bring a different way of thinking and a unique perspective to the job. This enables us to find solutions to problems that may not have been solved otherwise. Once again, this is of benefit to the company; perhaps even increasing sales if a new process or innovation has been made.

Ultimately, persons with autism want equitable opportunities that will improve their lives and the workplace. After all, isn't a job another area of life we want to thrive in, thus increasing the work environment and productivity of the workplace.

I hope you have gleaned some important from this toolkit and it prompts you to hire persons with autism. We have much to bring to the table to help and support your company. Work with us and we will bring a new and exciting energy that will only benefit the company and its employees.

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Appendix A

Onboarding Tool: Task Breakdown Road Trip

The purpose of this tool is to assist with the onboarding and training processes by providing employers with a guide on how to provide clear directions for Autistic employees, using a road trip as an analogy.

1. Identifying the Desired Task/Destination

The first step with any road trip is figuring out the destination, in a similar vein the employer should be able to clearly define the target skill or task they want to impart onto their employee.

2. Identifying the Best Way to Convey this Information/Figuring Out the Best Means of Travel

After figuring out your destination the next step for any road trip is figuring out the best means of travel, recognizing that everyone has their preferred of travel whether that be by car, train, or plane. In a similar vein Autistic people have preferred styles of learning and interpreting new information, some may be visual learners, tactile learners, or verbal learners. The best way to discern this information is to engage the employee directly and ask them how you as an employer can best support their learning in this new environment. While this may seem inconvenient to employers at first, it is important to recognize the long-term benefits in catering training to the individual, as it will save the future resources needed for additional training.

3. Task Breakdown/ Navigation

Now that you have determined your method of travel, the next step is providing the directions for the journey. It is important to recognize that everyone has their preference for the level of detail they need to be comfortable during this process, like how some drivers require explicit direction at each intersection, others simply need to know the name of the street they're turning on. Along the same lines, Autistic people may require tasks to be broken down into parts, some smaller than others, once again reinforcing the need to engage with your employee to determine what level of detail they require to complete the task comfortably and efficiently. Keep in mind that the more meticulous the task breakdown, the easier it is for the employee to complete each step successfully. With each completed step, the employee develops increased confidence in their abilities, becoming a more valuable asset to the company. As highlighted throughout the stories of CJAE, employer guidance can take the form of a pocketbook with step-by-step instructions with pictures and words, a detailed checklist, or hands-on instruction.

What Does this Look Like?

Example Task: Sanitizing your workstation at the end of the day.

Version 1: General Task Breakdown

1. Go to the sanitizing station, put on disposable gloves and gather one piece of clean cloth and a disinfectant spray bottle.
2. Using the disinfectant spray bottle lightly coat your desk with a thin layer of the disinfectant and wipe with the cloth until the desk is dry.
3. Return the disinfectant spray bottle to the sanitization station and place the used cloth and protective gloves into the garbage bin.

Version 2: Moderately Detailed Task Breakdown

1. Go to the sanitizing station and put on disposable gloves.
2. At the sanitizing station grab one piece of disposable cloth and a disinfectant spray bottle.
3. Return to your desk with the cloth and disinfectant spray.
4. Remove any office supplies from the surface of the desk.
5. Using the disinfectant spray bottle spray the desk 3-5 times ensuring the entire surface is lightly coated with the disinfectant.
6. Using the disposable cloth, wipe the desk until the desk is dry.
7. Return the disinfectant spray to the sanitizing station.
8. Place the used cloth and disposable gloves into the garbage bin.
9. Return all materials removed from the desk back to their original place.

Version 3: Very Detailed Task Breakdown

1. Go to the sanitization station.
2. At the sanitization station put on a medium sized pair of disposable gloves.
3. At the sanitization station grab one piece of disposable cloth and a disinfectant spray bottle.
4. After gathering the disinfectant spray bottle and disposable cloth return to your desk.
5. Remove any office supplies from the surface of the desk, including, keyboards, monitors, papers, pencils, pens, or any other devices and place them on the adjacent desk.
6. Using the disinfectant spray bottle, spray each corner, and the center of your desk one time.
7. Using the disposable cloth, wipe the desk until the desk is fully dry.
8. Return the disinfectant spray to the sanitizing station.
9. Place the used cloth into the garbage bin.
10. Place the disposable gloves into the garbage bin.
11. Return all materials removed from the desk back to their original place.

Things to Consider When Making a Task Breakdown...

- Is each step in the task breakdown discrete, meaning there is a clear beginning, middle and end to each step?
- Are you communicating with the employee to tailor the breakdown to meet their specific needs, both in level of detail and method of communication?

Helpful Tips for Creating a Task Breakdown

- Complete the task personally and record each step in its entirety.
- Confirm the task breakdown is sufficiently detailed by having a second person follow the steps verbatim.

4. Checking in

Now that you have provided the necessary tools and resources, it is important that the employer is monitoring and checking in to ensure that the employee is comfortable with the responsibilities assigned. While this may seem like an undue burden to the employer it is important to recognize that when given the proper tools, Autistic employees may only need to be guided through this process a single time to achieve success and consistency in fulfilling their role.

Appendix B

The following is a list of other pertinent quotes from the cited articles. Quotes deemed important to an equity toolkit were taken from each article. Due to the number of citations from the articles, we decided to submit what we felt was the most appropriate as part of the toolkit. It was necessary to perform this action as we did not want the toolkit itself to become inundated with too many quotes. It is important that the toolkit is of a reasonable length, with a view to the best use of the employer's time in mind.

Should the employer wish for more information on a particular section, other quotes from each article are on the following pages. For example, one employer may want to know and understand other personal barriers faced by persons with ASDs. Another employer may wish to know what other steps can be taken by the employee to help the company grow, internally and externally.

The appendix is presented according to each section of the toolkit. Each section contains a compiled list of quotations from the various articles of CJAE. The pieces are in the same order in each sub-section to make for a more accessible location of other quotes the employer may find applicable.

If the employer wants and has the necessary time, they may find the complete article beneficial and interesting. These articles can be found at cjae.ca.

Personal Difficulties

[Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ](#)
this other-worldly way of being and viewing the world.

uncomfortable making direct eye contact

I had assumed that if I had a college diploma, I would get a job in my field easily.

not very good at receiving feedback

My biggest problem was not getting along well with one other employee. I made the mistake of inadvertently upsetting them

they wanted me to hit the ground running and expected me to have more knowledge and experience than I had.

Yet I had expected more guidance and orientation.

very stuck in his ways.

being bullied

Blake would misinterpret what people were trying to say. Some people would not take the time to understand what he was saying or to explain to him what is going on.

That there are always going to be bullies at work. The key is to learn not to be one and to stay away from them!

To learn to control one's anger.

To handle feedback more constructively.

A Path to Passionⁱⁱ

Jobs were hard to retain, but I had no clue as to why. Getting them was easy for me, keeping them on the other hand...

I continued to move from job to job. I never seemed to find the right fit. I didn't fit in because I didn't dress as a "typical" woman. I spoke my mind too honestly, without beating around the bush or being nicey-nice. I was too outspoken about things that I knew would be beneficial to the company. And I thought I didn't like change.

The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders face many challenges during their lives that range from decoding the public school system, understanding social cues and surviving the challenges inherent in higher education. Working lives of unmitigated frustration and unfulfilled potential.

I was initially very unsettled about everything that could possibly go wrong

We have worked very hard with our son, with varying levels of success, to make him realize there are clothes appropriate for casual settings, school, church and the work world.

Self-advocacy is a hard thing for many with ASD,

Social and Institutional Barriers

Call for the Federal Public Service^{iv}

Autistic individuals are underutilized in the workforce

persons with disabilities were underrepresented in applications for positions in the public service

even more dramatic underrepresentation when it came to actually being appointed to a position

"54% of hiring managers reported they were not aware that the PSC's Personnel Psychology Centre offered expertise in assessment accommodation and on developing bias-free assessment methods and tools"

Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ

you're not going to do very well in the job interview.

workplaces often fail to make accommodations for disabled workers or they don't take the time to learn about autism and what we need.

unease and continuous staff turnover

company's expectations.

The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ

too few individuals are given a fair shake in both the hiring process and the workplace once hired

tell the employer any special accommodations she will need from them

professional and employment literature ignores one other area of work that many with ASD, me included, have excelled: teaching at all levels

A British study commissioned by the Office for National Statistics suggests that as many as 78% of adults with autism are underemployed or unemployed. (National Autism Society, 2021)

An American study finds relatively similar data to the British research when they conclude that 85% of Americans with ASD are underemployed or unemployed. (Sparrow, 2018) The American research also indicates that only 53% of young adults with ASD have worked for pay outside the home in the first eight years following high school. (Ciccocioppo and Taylor, 2018)

If the store policy is to ask for identification of everyone under 25, he will do it even if the line is long and customers are fussing.

Benefits

[Call for the Federal Public Service^{iv}](#)

a pool of labour that employers can access to meet their staffing needs

autistic employees whose diverse skills, ideas, and talent will bring positive improvements to their organizational effectiveness and bottom line.

An initiative by these organizations to recruit, support, and retain autistic employees may prove effective in finding dedicated employees while making them more organizationally diverse, higher performing, and agile. required skills not common in neuro-typical job seekers create a more inclusive public service.

[Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ](#)

The owners and my supervisors liked my efficiency and that I always asked if there was anything else I could do before I punched out.

[Employment Equity: What Meaningful Employment Looks Like to Me.](#)

With my Autism, I have a good memory of sports statistics and knowledge. I also have a photographic memory which means that I can “see” everything I read as pictures in my mind. Therefore, I can recall lots of facts, sports stats, and things like maps. So I both remember everything I read and I can also visually see things in my mind like a map of the world.

people with disabilities, including ASD, can be excellent employees

reliable and committed

unique gifts to offer

[The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ](#)

the passions and fixations that are the hallmarks of many with autism can translate into valuable skills

an encyclopedic interest in dinosaurs into a high-profile academic career

biggest advocates of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union

He takes and enforces the store rules seriously and will not be bullied by customers because he knows he has authority on his side, all common characteristics of ASD.

If the store policy is to ask for identification of everyone under 25, he will do it even if the line is long and customers are fussing.

Actions (Employer)

[Call for the Federal Public Service^{iv}](#)

new guides on inclusive assessment methods and advance diverse interview boards

recruitment initiative Youth with Disabilities Summer Employment Opportunity (YwDSEO)

dedicating hiring processes

LiveWorkPlay placements

Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities

Ready, Willing and Able initiative

Furthermore, the Treasury Board (2020) wishes for the Federal Public Service to hire 5000 persons with disabilities by 2025, and support will be made available

[Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ](#)

The boss needs to just help and coach the person on some of the social mistakes and they can't be vague.

two, 3-hour shifts a week since I was already overwhelmed with high school.

I was mentored by a compassionate editor, who besides having radio experience, had lots of patience to show me the ropes.

At the end of my contract, I didn't end up getting hired, but they were supportive in allowing me to volunteer twice a week. I owe a lot to the owner who was also a great mentor.

straight-forward constructive criticism and support

treat him with respect as any person deserves, as well as patiently explain what was going on in a way he could understand it.

He was so nice and made me feel welcome and somewhat less nervous

training me immediately showing step-by-step how the news runs.

provided me with a checklist to follow

constructive criticism and positive feedback

[Employment Equity: What Meaningful Employment Looks Like to Me.^{iv}](#)

checklist is a good helpful thing to keep me on task

[The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ](#)

interviewing professor was very complimentary regarding the information she shared and thanked her for making it clear what she needs from the get-go.

Autism specific hiring initiatives are being pioneered ... with the support of multiple levels of government

SAP has a 90% retention rate for its staff with ASD

employees like my son bring to their work every day an intense attention to detail, commitment to quality and consistency, creative and out-of-the box thinking, ability to excel at repetitive tasks,

have lower turnover rates and are recognized for their honesty and loyalty.

Companies who have reported success in retaining their ASD employees say clarity in the workplace is a key to building an autism-friendly jobsite. There must be clear directives and deadlines, instructions must be nuance-free, and managers must be quick to clear obstacles that prevent those directives from being met.

a willingness to allow some time out when I needed, a relaxation room for breaks and a recognition that not everyone wants to be part of coffee time and Secret Santa exchanges. I enjoy

working with clear structure and set tasks.

took a near meltdown in her stride and put it within an understandable autism context

Individuals with ASD have told me they prefer when places of employment provide either a well-defined and unambiguous dress code upon hiring or provide the uniform eliminating any chances for fashion faux pas.

Approaches (Employee)

[Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ](#)

The boss needs to just help and coach the person on some of the social mistakes and they can't be vague.

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He was so nice and made me feel welcome and somewhat less nervous

training me immediately showing step-by-step how the news runs.

provided me with a checklist to follow

constructive criticism and positive feedback

[A Path to Passionⁱⁱ](#)

worked a variety of jobs

program with a company that helps individuals with disabilities find employment

It's important I get critical feedback; it makes me a better speaker.

[Employment Equity: What Meaningful Employment Looks Like to Me.^v](#)

timers on my phone

co-op placement

Community Integration through Co-operative Education.

Volunteering has been a great way for me to meet people and to turn opportunities into paid positions

volunteering was very rewarding, as I got to know new people, get connected to potential job opportunities and received awards that I then put on my resume.

get good references from these opportunities

many different employment programs available to youth and adults

learn a lot about how to handle different conflicts in the workplace, how to do well in an interview, and how to build my resume better.

listen to music or play a game on my phone if I needed a break

refocus and de-stress

a visual schedule

support worker or job coach

support worker teach me how to take the bus and the train independently

[The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ](#)

need some time to choose a realistic job plan based on his areas of interest

Chores at home and a paper route provided my oldest many of the building blocks that made his entry into the work world much smoother than it would have been otherwise.

many of the roadblocks faced regarding job interviews can be overcome with pre-interview preparation

arrive looking like you have taken this interview seriously and want to make a good first impression

We were part of his team and committed to ensuring our son was a success at any job he took on.

My oldest son has never had a problem telling employers what he needs from them

Few jobs have more predictable structure than teaching

I was clearly in charge of my workspace, and I did not have to interact with other teachers to be successful in delivering my lessons.

My time was spent in my office and classroom with students who valued me for my expertise rather than my friendship. The power dynamic was all one way, and there was little confusion for someone with ASD as to who was in charge. High school, college and university instruction also feeds a very narrow knowledge band that is so typical for many with ASD.

individuals should actively support firms that provide meaningful employment for those on the spectrum while boycotting companies who do not.

Role of Parents

[Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs – Securing a Career I Loveⁱ](#)

start doing jobs when they're in middle school

I have to tell parents, depending on the age of their kid, if you have a three-year-old that's not talking, you need to get him into a really good early intervention program. I recommend they start doing jobs when they're in middle school - paper route, walking dogs. Getting job experience before you graduate from high school and college is a really good idea.

I was fortunate to obtain a job at a local grocery store. The owners (who my parents knew) understood I needed accommodations.

In some ways we may have contributed to Blake's failure at this job. How? Two ways: First, by inadvertently setting him up to believe that his employer would provide him with solid on-boarding, training, and orientation. I came from a large employer that had extensive orientation for new hires, especially recent graduates. At my workplace, orientation training would take weeks with mentors to go to after the new employee got their feet wet on tasks.

Since I'm usually a guy who doesn't spend a lot of time talking through issues, every week I would send a wise quote to help him through this challenging work experience. Below are some I sent Blake to give him some comfort in knowing he wasn't alone – after all, 'what doesn't kill us, makes us stronger'.

Mom and Dad assured me that I would do just fine. I accepted the job offer and before I knew it, I was on my next career-building and life journey.

[The Challenge of Meaningful Work for Adults with ASDⁱⁱⁱ](#)

Not working was a sign of failure for both my Depression-raised parents

We made a conscious decision that our son at 18 could and would make informed decisions for himself about being medicated and applying for the provincial pension.

All our children had chores

clothing checks before he left for school

If you make the decision that a career is a possibility for your child you are all-in until they move out on their own, and even then, you are the first one they call when they have a conflict at work or an interaction at work caused them anxiety.^v

Endnotes

- i Blake Priddle, "Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs—Securing a Career I Love," *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* 2, no. 1 (2022): 21-33.
- ii Terri Robson, "A Path to Passion," *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* 2, no. 1 (2022): 34-38
- iii Kirk Winter, "The Challenge for Meaningful Work for Adults with ASD," *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* 2, no. 1 (2022): 47-56.
- iv Kevin Au, "Call for the Federal Public Service to create an initiative to recruit and hire employees with Autism: How they can be come more diverse, agile, and higher performing while improving staff retention rates and reducing staffing/training costs," *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* 2, no. 1 (2022): 11-17.
- v Elliot Smith, "Employment Equity: What Meaningful Employment Looks Like to Me." *Canadian Journal of Autism Equity* 2, no. 1 (2022): 41-46