In the not too distant past, it was a widely held belief that individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were “too disabled” to work. Today, however, we know more about how to help those with ASD go to work. A major contributing factor to this trend is an increase in our knowledge on how to best support people with ASD in the workplace, as well as provide support to the hiring employers. Additionally, demonstrations have shown how vocational service programs can customize job supports to promote the employment of people with severe disabilities, including those with ASD.

One approach that has enhanced employment success for people with disabilities is supported employment. The concept is founded on the belief that all people, regardless of the severity of their disability, can work in real jobs for real pay. Prior to the advent of supported employment, people with significant disabilities were perceived as too disabled to work in their communities. Due to this perception, they were relegated to attend day activity centers or work in sheltered workshops.

Supported employment involves identifying and facilitating, or designing and implementing, job supports specifically geared toward assisting people with the most severe disabilities gain and maintain employment. Generally, these services entail having a job coach or employment specialist...
work opportunity, 3) providing any necessary on-the-job support, including, for example, negotiating work hours, providing job skills training that extends beyond what the employer provides to a new hire, and modeling positive social interactions, and 4) monitoring job performance to ensure the worker is meeting established employer standards and providing additional support if needed. Notably, Garcia-Villamisar, Wehman and Navarro found that supported employment resulted in greater quality of life for people with ASD across a four-year period than employment in sheltered environments.

Ideally, when best practices are followed, a young adult with ASD will be employed when she leaves school and, the transition involves a handoff from one set of support providers to another. Although improvements are being made in this area of transition from school to work, all too often young adults are leaving school unemployed. The case study that follows will illustrate how supported employment helped a young man with ASD make employment a reality.

Working Toward Employment

Lester is a 25-year-old man, with an autism and mild mental retardation diagnosis, who resides in a small town with his mother, stepfather and sister. In high school, Lester was evaluated to determine his vocational abilities. The report revealed that he most likely would perform best in a work environment that was highly structured, with considerable supervision. It also stated that Lester seemed compliant, as he was able to take turns with classmates and usually remained on task. Some unusual behaviors, such as head shaking and random vocalizations also were noted. This evaluation resulted in Lester’s participation in the school’s prevocational and extended work training. Based on his interests and skill level, he was enrolled in activities that taught them laundry and clerical tasks. Unfortunately, at the time he aged out of school, Lester remained unemployed.

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After leaving school, Lester’s parents contacted the state vocational rehabilitation agency on their son’s behalf, to receive employment assistance. The state referred him to a local disability vocational service provider for additional assessment. Lester was scheduled to participate in a full-time, 20-day assessment; however, this was terminated prior to the end of the first day. Apparently, the service provider felt Lester’s support needs far exceeded what they provided. The provider recommended Lester attend an adult activities center, as this type of environment would be more capable of meeting his needs. This was very disappointing to Lester and his parents. Feeling as though they had no other options, Lester was enrolled in an adult day center.

Two years later, Lester was referred to a supported employment program. During an initial home visit, Lester’s mother told the job coach that he spent much of his time either watching TV or sleeping at the day center. She noted that this was an indication that her son was bored and depressed, which often exacerbated some of his more challenging behaviors.

Prior to starting the job search, the coach recommended that Lester participate in some situational assessments. Situational assessments involve observing a person with a disability perform various types of work tasks in real-to-life (not simulated) workplaces. During this time, the coach can gain insight into the job seeker’s preferred learning style, reaction to environmental factors, and communication and social skills, among other things. At the conclusion of this brief activity, the coach should have insight into the person’s vocational interests, strengths and potential on-the-job support needs. This information then is used to help develop a direction for the job seeker’s employment search.

The situational assessments took place at two large retail stores. During the assessments, the job coach observed many of Lester’s abilities. For example, he had good mobility and was able to manipulate small objects. In addition, sometimes he would walk away from the task, but he could easily be redirected. He also could express his likes and dislikes. For example, if asked if he wanted to continue a task, like filing CDs, or stop and go home, he would say, “CDs, CDs,” indicating that he still wanted to work.

She also observed some unusual behaviors. For example, when first shown a new task, Lester would rock his upper body
from side to side while loudly vocalizing indiscriminate sounds and waving his hands in the air. As Lester concentrated on completing his tasks, his behaviors lessened. Once he completed a task, or became “stuck” on a task, the behaviors and sounds increased.

The assessment revealed that the job search should focus on locating employment where his form of communication and noise making would be accepted. It was also determined that the work preferably would allow Lester to work independently with minimal supervision, and to move around the work place.

Step By Step

The second assessment also was at a large retailer. During the second assessment, the coach recognized that the employer was very supportive of all of its workers. In addition, the tasks that Lester performed seemed to interest him. After this assessment, Lester continued to indicate that he wanted to go back to that employer by repeatedly saying the name of the store. Lester’s indication of interest in working for this company, his parent’s agreement and the perceived supportiveness of the environment led the coach to pursue a job opportunity there.

The coach approached the employer about using job-coaching services and creating a job for Lester. The employer was willing to do so, and in October 2005, Lester was hired to work 20 hours a week for $7.10 an hour. At hire, his job involved working in the electronics department and assisting the manager and assistant manager with miscellaneous projects around the store, such as rearranging stock on shelves. His job duties in electronics included sorting new CD and DVD stock, straightening the DVD and CD displays and cleaning display cases. The job coach used systematic instruction to teach Lester how to perform these job tasks. Lester was able to learn most of the tasks with ease, and soon was completing all of his work before his shift ended.

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As he was not certain that Lester would be able to accurately complete this task, and mistakes would have a negative impact on the system. He reluctantly allowed Lester to be trained and found that he was extraordinarily accurate. Over a five month period, the job coach provided 387 hours of on-the-job site-skills training.

Facilitating Support

In addition to providing on-the-job site-skills training to teach Lester how to perform his tasks, the job coach also was responsible for providing or facilitating support to assist Lester with some other challenges. For example, on three separate occasions, Lester bit a person who prevented him from getting or doing something. It was discovered that biting was one of the ways Lester communicated his disappointment or frustration. Staff was taught to use verbal prompts like “stay and help,” rather than physical prompts like extending an arm to prevent movement, to assist Lester with staying on task.

In addition, too much sugar intake increases Lester’s energy level. In one instance, after eating a sweet snack, Lester ran down the aisles of the store flailing his arms and making loud vocalizations. The job coach consulted with his parents, who agreed to pack him a healthy lunch for his break and give him money to

Overall, Lester excelled in performing all the tasks assigned to him. In the domestics department, Lester was assigned the task of “zoning” (straightening) the comforters and sheets area. Lester zoned each shelf meticulously and accurately, to the point that even the store’s general manager commented on how impressed she was with Lester’s work. Lester also expressed an interest in learning to use the hand-held inventory computers to price items. The store manager initially seemed apprehensive,
buy a “sweet” to eat after he finished working for the day. Co-workers also were asked not to give Lester sweets as a treat, or buy him sweets out of the vending machine, during work hours.

A few days after supports were put into place, Lester opened a package of candy without buying it. He ate some of the candy and stored the rest in his book bag. Lester was pulled aside and told by management and the coach that this was stealing and that he could lose his job. Lester was asked to leave work for the day. His parents were called to pick him up and they indicated that some of his home privileges were going to be restricted. Fortunately, the coach had prepared job site personnel for this anticipated diverse behavior in advance, which made it more acceptable to the employer. Also, to help prevent stealing from occurring again, a weekly reward system to reinforce Lester’s appropriate behavior was implemented. This system has been effective in motivating Lester to use appropriate work behaviors and has helped to eliminate inappropriate ones.

Lester has been employed for more than a year and is regarded as a very valuable employee. He has received several pay raises. His parents say that prior to becoming employed, it was difficult to wake him up in the mornings. Now, the night before he works, he sets out his clothes and prepares his lunch, eagerly waking in the morning to go to work. In addition, his paycheck has been a welcome addition to help with the expenses related to Lester’s care. His ability to work has amazed many who thought that he could never be successful in community employment. It is anticipated that Lester will work for many years to come, as when asked if he likes working, he says, “Work, work, yes, yes.”

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References


