

EMPLOYMENT PLANNING FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Abstract

Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders need level supports and services analogous to those needed by their school age counterparts; particularly important are supported employment services and intensive behavioral supports. This paper provides an overview of the community-based vocational training program that Melmark has developed in response to this growing need. This program integrates four components that promote employment outcomes for people with ASD who display challenging behaviors: (1) a sophisticated understanding of autism; (2) ongoing employment assessment, job development and training within community settings; (3) systematic application of the principles found in the science of applied behavior analysis; and (4) comprehensive post-placement consultation, collaboration, and support in work environments.

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As this decade draws to a close, people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) rightfully expect to be able to live meaningful, productive lives in or near their communities of choice. Although great strides have been made in supporting the ability of people with ASD to live, work, and recreate in local communities, services and supports for adults with ASD who present with severe and persistent behavioral challenges such as aggression, self-injury, or property destruction lag far behind.

In response to the need for more comprehensive vocational services for adults with ASD who display challenging behaviors, Melmark has worked with legislators, licensing agencies, funding agencies, and local employers to develop an array of services designed to promote meaningful employment opportunities for this small but difficult to serve population. The vocational training model at Melmark integrates four key elements: (1) a solid understanding of autism; (2) ongoing employment assessment, job development and training in community settings; (3) systematic application of the principles found in the science of applied behavior analysis; and (4) comprehensive post-placement consultation, collaboration, and support in work environments. This paper provides an overview of these factors and a discussion of how these elements contributed to Melmark's integrated community-based vocational training program.

Understanding Autism

In addition to the core deficits comprising ASD, a percentage of people on the spectrum display challenging behaviors that present a risk of harm to self or others. The risk of harm associated with the display of challenging behaviors represents a significant, but surmountable roadblock to successful employment for some people with autism.

Employment Assessment & Job Development

As the entitlement of public education come to an end, people with significant disabilities move into an adult service delivery system that lags far behind services available through the public education system. This means that to make the most of what the adult world has to offer, transition planning must begin at an early age. One of the most important objectives of transition planning is to develop and implement a plan to secure employment, which can be accomplished by use of: assessments and information gathering; job development, analysis, matching and sampling; employment training; motivation, less resistance, and serve as a natural reinforcer of related work behaviors.

Strengths, interests and needs (S/I/N) assessment. Training and vocational options that emphasize a person's strengths and interests should result in improved motivation, less resistance, and serve as a natural reinforcer of related work behaviors.

Strengths. There are a number of formal assessment tools available to assess individuals' strengths. Two of the more popular tools are the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale II (Sparrow, Cicchetti, & Balla, 2007), the Adaptive Behavior Assessment System (Harrison & Oakland, 2003). These tools provide overall scores as well as relative strengths individuals possess. While these instruments offer valuable information, they primarily assess a person's abilities. Therefore, further exploration of a person's preferences and need for support is necessary.

Interests. Methods of assessing persons' interests should focus on the collaborative process used to gather information as opposed to an assessment tool that is completed by a parent, teacher, or job coach. In this regard, support teams have tended to focus on the process of getting to know a person and what is meaningful to him or her. Common approaches utilized include Personal Futures Planning, (Mount & Zwernik, 1988), Person-Centered Planning, (Holburn & Vietze, 1992) and Essential Lifestyle Planning (Smull, 2000).

Needs. When assessing a person's needs, it is best to focus on the supports they need to efficiently and effectively complete various activities as opposed to focusing on the things a person can't do. An ideal tool for this purpose is the Support Intensity Scale (Thompson, et al., 2004). In short, an S/I/N assessment should encompass multiple domains, give priority to relative, as opposed to absolute strengths and interests, and emphasize what a person can do when adequately supported.

Vocational profiles. The purpose of developing vocational profiles is to move beyond job development and move into career development for people. Key elements of a vocational profile include an overview of one's strengths, interests, and needs, an overview of one's work and educational experience, and resources available to support the person. This process should incorporate input from the individual, family, friends and school, employment professionals, employers, and other community members familiar to the person (Calahan & Garner, 1997).

Job sampling. Typical vocational assessment may suggest that people with ASD are not adequately prepared for employment. We need to fight this notion and acknowledge that most jobs are going to require some degree of accommodation and support. The best ways to assess strength, interests, and support needs in a particular environment is to conduct the assessment in the environment in which one is expected to perform. Therefore, by conducting situational assessments across a variety of community jobs, an employment specialist can accurately assess such aspects as a person's work styles, time management and problem solving skills, and preferences in terms of environments, socialization, communication, and routines.

Job development. The focus of job development should be based on individuals' unique abilities, preferences and needs. A useful strategy for job development is to customize employment opportunities that involve carving, creating and negotiating job descriptions (Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007). This can be achieved by a job analysis that yields information about expected duties and the culture of the work environment (Griffin, Hammis, & Geary,

2007). Overall, it is essential to balance the needs of people with ASD with those of employers for effective job development to occur (Callahan & Garner, 1997).

Job matching. To successfully match a person with work environments that will allow him or her to truly flourish, there should be congruence between the person and the physical demands of a job, the social expectations inherent at the job and the ability of employees to physically navigate throughout the work environment (Gerhardt, 2008).

Employment Training

There are two schools of thought with respect to training people to complete job-specific tasks: train and then place, and place and then train. At Melmark we lean towards the latter for two reasons. First, regardless of one's background or experience, any new job requires site-specific training. Second, it is likely not efficient to wait until people displayed competency in every pre-vocational training step before attempting employment. The one area in which we adopt the "train and then place" approach is with respect to the global employment skills that are needed regardless of position.

Global employment skills. In lieu of emphasizing traditional elements found in pre-employment training that tends to focus on teaching people to be competent in fulfilling specific tasks that make up job, we focus on global employment skills that are needed regardless of the tasks that comprise their job. These skills relate to: (a) communication and social skills repertoires, (b) self-management and time-management skills, (c) problem-solving or coping skills, and (d) navigation skills.

Communication and social skills repertoires. Key communication repertoires to promote in prospective employees' repertoires include (a) I need help, (b) I don't understand, please show me (c) I'm all done, or I need more work, (d) I need a break, (e) basics of social skills that are important in the typical workplace (e.g., greetings, personal space, and "good touch-bad touch").

Self-management strategies. Although people with ASD commonly flourish when job expectations are clear, they may flounder when expectations are unclear or require autonomous actions. How fast do I need to work? What should do if I run out of jobs to do? When can I take my lunch break? These situations represent difficult self- and time-management challenges for people with ASD. What's more, people with ASD will often learn to display socially appropriate behaviors in the presence of trained staff, but as natural supports replace job coaches, the person must increasingly rely on self-management skills to be successful in their jobs. To prepare people with autism to display greater autonomy in these contexts, teachers and job coaches should attempt to teach strategies that can be used to (a) self-monitor or self-record their progress, (b) evaluate if expectations have been fulfilled, and (c) self-reward when expectations are met (Gross & Drabman, 1982).

Problem-solving and coping skills. There are numerous problem-solving strategies proposed in the literature. Most of these adopt some version of (a) identifying the problem, (b) exploring options, and (c) choosing the best option.

For people more severely affected by ASD, these three steps can seem overwhelming. Therefore, we prefer to support peoples' self-management effort by being able to identify that there is a problem, teach people to consult a cheat-sheet (or a set of "if-then" statements), and use one of the key communication skills identified above (i.e., I need help, I don't understand, etc...).

Navigation skills. This area of employment skills is an integral component of the community employment training. However, employment specialists' efforts are often thwarted by such circumstances as an employee becoming anxious over not being able to find the nearest bathroom, or not knowing where their fellow coworkers congregate during breaks. Therefore, beyond the training of expected job duties, people with ASD require specific instruction in navigation in order to develop a sense of autonomy in their jobs (Gerhardt, 2008).

Integrating Principles of Applied Behavior Analysis into the Workplace

The science of applied behavior analysis (ABA) is based on the idea that people will use the most efficient and effective way they know to meet their needs (Horner & Billingsley, 1988). The job of caregivers is to reinforce socially acceptable ways for children to get their needs met, (e.g., "asking for help," in lieu of "screaming" to gain assistance) (Carr & Durand, 1985). For these socially acceptable behaviors to persist, they must be governed by rules or contingencies (consequences) (Hineline & Wanchisen, 2004). ABA provides a structured and systematic way of assessing, teaching, and evaluating the influence that environmental factors (i.e., rules and contingencies) play in setting the occasion for desirable or undesirable behaviors.

The process begins with a description of the individual's socially relevant behaviors. Data are collected on these behaviors as well as the context in which they do and do not occur (O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1990). These data provide a baseline measure of a person's performance, and guide clinicians in developing hypotheses that explain (a) the conditions that set occasion for the behaviors, and (b) the consequences that reinforce those behaviors in one's repertoire. Once these hypotheses are developed, clinicians design plans intended to set the person up for success. For example, a plan for a person who screams to "recruit attention" would attempt to (a) minimize his need to "recruit" attention by obtaining a job with coworkers who would engage him socially on a proactive basis, (b) teach him socially acceptable alternatives to recruiting social interactions, and (c) reduce the quality of attention he receives should he start screaming. A critical element in achieving and maintaining success with behavioral and other objectives is the ability to provide ongoing consultation, training, and problem-solving in the work environment.

Comprehensive, Post-placement Consultation, Collaboration and Support

Maintaining a job and for that job to evolve in a career requires ongoing support on multiple fronts such as supported general employment services, job

coaching, job accommodations, and clinical support, and ongoing community support.

Supported employment. “Supported employment provides persons with disabilities paid work in integrated settings accompanied by support both to the employer and the employee” (Goetz, Certo, Doering, & Lee, 1996, p. 284). Historically, beneficiaries of supported employment efforts have been those with mild to moderate disabilities; these benefits have, by in large, not been extended to those with more severe disabilities, including those with ASD (Smith, Belcher, & Juhrs, 2000).

Job coaching. Job coaches provide an array of supports to employees such as assistance in task completion and modifying job demands, providing behavioral supports, performing assessments, and collecting performance data. Job coaches also provide on site supervision, support, training, prompting, and feedback. In order to perform such duties, “Formal training and ongoing supervision and support are essential for [employees] who are often asked to be independent, creative, and knowledgeable in both job duties and disability issues” (Butterworth & Kiernan, 1996, p. 274). When training its Job Coaches, Melmark relies on classroom and community training. Just as with training supported employees at their jobs while doing their jobs, we find it best to train newer job coaches out in the field while they are working with supported employees.

Job accommodations. The focus of employment for people with ASD should not be how we can help the person be “ready” for a job, but instead how we may be able to make the job “ready” for the person. Modifying tasks or the way that jobs are done to make them a better match for employees is an important form of job support (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). With the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in today’s work environment, employers are becoming more sensitive and willing to make accommodations for their workforce. For example, in some fast food restaurants, written instructions have been replaced with visual depictions of the sequences with which employees should carry out common tasks. In short, many employers are capable of providing workplace accommodations and supports for individuals with autism by tapping into the same resources they employ for their typical employees (Hagner & Cooney, 2005).

Clinical support. Before an employee who displays challenging behaviors begins a job, employment specialists should have worked with the employer and coworkers to establish appropriate accommodations and expectations. A plan should also be developed that identifies how employers will attempt to support a person to reduce triggers for challenging behaviors, facilitate self-management strategies, how to respond to triggers, and how to respond when the person displays desirable and undesirable behaviors in the work place. These plans should be kept as simple as possible in order to (a) facilitate treatment integrity, (b) reduce stigmatization, (c) increase the odds that the natural environment will provide sufficient structure, and reinforcement for displaying good work behavior and refraining from challenging behaviors.

Although this plan will be drafted before the person begins working at the job, it is likely that it will need to be adjusted to accommodate new or

alternative factors that were not addressed in the initial plan. For example, if a job coach were to determine that an employee would benefit from more access to a preferred item or activity than the employer finds reasonable, a change in the employees plan could be made to provide increased access to the item before or after work.

Ongoing community support. The employment specialist should initiate regular contact with employers and other service providers such as group home staff or parents. The supervisor should conduct periodic social validity checks with employers to assess how things are going, whether they getting their needs met, and are the supports provided acceptable in that setting. This can be done informally with frequent communication, as well as in a more formal manner by asking key stakeholders to a series of questions in person or in writing. Such assessments are often referred to as social validity assessments (Wolf, 1978) and may serve as a valuable source of information that can be used to address problems or concerns before they become job threatening.

Integration and Collaboration

In this paper we have identified and described four elements that are important in supporting people with ASD in community-based jobs. Successfully implementing such a model that integrates these elements requires dedication and collaboration among a variety of stakeholders, such as the person with ASD, their family, professionals and select community members. Ultimately, the pieces of puzzle begin to come together for adults with ASD when these collective efforts focus on facilitating their goals and fostering their limitless potential as thriving members of their community.

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