ICI ThinkWork!

AUTISM SOCIETY

Improving the Lives of All Affected by Autism

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

A TOOLKIT FOR PROFESSIONALS & ADVOCATES IN THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

WWW.AUTISM-SOCIETY.ORG

WWW.THINKWORK.ORG

LAST UPDATED JULY, 2021

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Introduction

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can work in competitive integrated employment* when they are given appropriate supports. Many individuals with disabilities explain that their involvement in our economy is an important part of true inclusion. Working is not just about building self-confidence but also ensuring that people of all abilities have opportunities to achieve their potential, increase their independence, and pursue their purpose in life.

Nonetheless, employment outcomes for individuals with ASD have traditionally been poor. Even those who do find work are often underemployed, underpaid, and do not hold onto jobs for a long period of time. However, it is a mistake to assume that poor employment outcomes for individuals with ASD mean that most cannot work. People with ASD can work when given appropriate supports and a good job match is found!

***What do we mean by competitive integrated employment?** Competitive integrated employment is defined as full-time or part-time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with coworkers without disabilities. (Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, 2014). This will be discussed in more detail below.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to share considerations and resources in order to support professionals and advocates when working with job seekers around employment. The following document will explore:

- *Who* can work
- *What* is meant by competitive integrated employment and how it differs from other employment settings
- *Why* competitive integrated employment matters
- *How* professionals can support job seekers to pursue competitive integrated employment
- *Where* you can find additional resources for your constituents

This publication was made possible through a collaboration between the Autism Society of America (ASA) and Thinkwork at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), University of Massachusetts Boston. In particular, ASA and ICI would like to recognize the efforts of Esther Kamau, graduate student from the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at ICI/UMass Boston, who led the development of this publication.

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Who can be competitively employed?

Individuals with ASD can work, including those with complex support needs and behaviors that others may find challenging, if given the proper supports and the right job match. Each person with ASD is unique, and they differ dramatically from one another in their skills, interests, motivation, ability to communicate, behavior, and social ability. Because of this, it is important for professional site staff to commit to a shared philosophical belief that competitive integrated employment should be the preferred outcome and that opportunities for employment should be available to everyone interested in working.

Making competitive integrated employment a reality involves the presumption of competence, the existence of the highest expectations from parents, teachers, and other professionals, and the realization that everyone has strengths and talents.

> "Unfortunately many people with disabilities grow up in the shadows of 'Low Expectation Syndrome.' Our hopes and dreams can be stripped away by doctors, teachers, parents, and providers who have preconceived notions about what we are capable of doing." — NICOLE LEBLANC

REAL WORK STORIES

Real Work Stories highlights the employment successes of people with significant disabilities who are working in paid jobs in their communities. Through the use of innovative, front-line employment support practices, these individuals are earning money, forming networks, and contributing to their communities. Learn more about these people and the promising practices that led to their success.

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Competitive Integrated Employment

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires that states ensure competitive integrated employment is offered as a priority outcome for all people with disabilities, including those with ASD. This definition has three main components:

- *Competitive*, which means that people with ASD/disabilities are paid the same as people without for doing the same or similar work. Competitive pay should be at or above the minimum wage.
- *Integrated*, which means people with ASD/disabilities have opportunities to interact with co-workers without disabilities in the workplace to the same extent as any other employee performing the same or similar work.
- *Employment*, which means full or part-time work, including self-employment.

Group Employment

Group employment or group supported employment is when a work group of eight or fewer individuals with disabilities is comprised, typically with a supervisor and/or support person. They are usually driven to a work location where other people without disabilities work.

The group may or may not be paid the minimum wage, but they usually earn less compared to employees without disabilities. They are also less likely to receive benefits. Group employment can occur at a provider or in the community.

Sheltered Employment

Sheltered employment or facility-based work occurs in a sheltered workshop. This is employment that occurs in a setting where the majority of employees have a disability. Work is contracted with businesses and people usually earn less than minimum wage. Because WIOA requires that states ensure that competitive employment is offered as a priority outcome, providers who offer employment support to people with ASD have been working to phase out sheltered workshops and transform them to offer competitive integrated employment. In addition, many individuals with disabilities have asserted that working in sheltered workshops is "being sheltered from the world," limiting exposure to the range of employment choices available.

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Day Services & Supports

Day services and supports (also known as wraparound supports, community-based non-work, holistic supports, or community integration services) can offer a variety of activities to individuals with ASD. Still, just like any other support service, there can be great variation in the quality. High-quality day services and supports should support people with ASD to access and participate in their communities outside of employment as part of a meaningful day.

Community Life Engagement activities may include volunteer work; postsecondary, adult, or continuing education; accessing community facilities such as a local library, gym, or recreation center; participation in retirement or senior activities; and anything else people with and without disabilities do in their off-work time. Such activities may support career exploration for those not yet working or between jobs, supplement employment hours for those who are working part-time or serve as a retirement option for older adults with IDD.

When exploring options for day services and supports, those of high quality are 1) individualized to the interests of the individual, 2) promote community membership and contribution, 3) build the individual's skills and social connections, and 4) are based on the individual's goals.

Adapted from:
https://www.thinkwork.org/high-quality-community-life-engagement-supports-four-guideposts-success

"Involvement in our economy is a really important part of true inclusion and a civil rights issue. It's all about dignity and respect. It's not just about building self-confidence but also getting people to see our abilities to work. We should live in the community, have a job or be self-employed, and pay taxes."

— FROM "A PURPOSE IN LIFE: WHY EMPLOYMENT FIRST MATTERS"

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

How can we support our constituents to pursue competitive integrated employment?

Although each individual with ASD is unique, it is important to acknowledge some common characteristics of people with ASD and how they can be addressed successfully in employment settings. This will help to identify key issues for the individual with ASD and/or support person to discuss with an employment provider.

Communication Demands

Research shows that about 50% of persons with autism never develop functional speech and those who do develop speech may have difficulty with the social aspects of language. Many have difficulty understanding the meaning of what others are saying – both through their spoken words and their expressions and body language. Employment specialists can help individuals with ASD find jobs that are a good match for their communication skills or style of communication.

Sensory Demands

Most individuals with ASD experience some sensory processing differences with some individuals being more hypersensitive to certain sounds, sights, smells, tastes, textures, or touch. A good sensory job match is one in which a person is not overwhelmed by stimuli and can stay focused on his or her job. Employment specialists may need to work with the employer to create an environment free from unnecessary distracters.

Social Demands

Social difficulties are a major obstacle faced by individuals with ASD in a work environment. As such, good job matches for persons with ASD are those that have a tolerance for individual differences. Some employees with ASD may do best in situations where less social interaction is required. Others may want to interact but simply have difficulty with the mechanics of social interaction. In both cases, employment staff will need to provide some customized supports to help workers with ASD understand what is acceptable, unacceptable, and expected.

Organizational Demands

Many workers with ASD require some level of predictability - to know what is going to happen and when. For many, the stress of not knowing if or when something is going to happen can cause overwhelming anxiety. Therefore, good job matches for individuals with ASD are often ones in which there is a high degree of structure, predictability, and routine. Responsibilities and schedules should be spelled out in great detail. And employees should be notified well in advance when there will be changes in the routine.

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

In supporting people finding employment, individuals with disabilities explain that professionals need to:

1. Get to know the people they support by identifying their interests, skills, and abilities
2. Have the skills needed to teach them to do the job
3. Help them adjust to new worksites by providing them with the tools, technology, and organizational skills needed for success
4. Be a good role model and presume they are competent
5. Recognize the importance of peer to peer connections and supporting individuals to develop them
6. Be prepared to support them if they run into any barriers

Adapted from: https://www.thinkwork.org/sites/thinkwork.org/files/files/ThinkWork_sabe_14_F.pdf

Where can I go to find employment support for my constituents?

With the proper exploration, job matching, and ongoing on-the-job supports, people with ASD can be competitively employed in jobs that are interesting and meaningful to them. The best employment specialists develop a thorough understanding of the individual's unique characteristics, learning style, strengths, and, most importantly, interests.

It is important to weigh this against workplace demands including communication, sensory, social, and organizational in order to achieve a good job match. This will help the employment specialist identify possible issues that could interfere with success, the match between the work environment and the person's needs, and possible supports and accommodations. This section will help you find employment-related resources for your constituents and help you screen them for quality.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "Supporting Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Quality Employment Practices"
- "The Truth Comes from Us: Supporting Workers with Developmental Disabilities" by ThinkWork

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Where can I go to find employment support for my constituents?

With the proper exploration, job matching, and ongoing on-the-job supports, people with ASD can be competitively employed in jobs that are interesting and meaningful to them.

The best employment specialists develop a thorough understanding of the individual's unique characteristics, learning style, strengths, and, most importantly, interests. It will be important to weigh this against workplace demands including communication, sensory, social, and organizational in order to achieve a good job match. This will help the employment specialist identify possible issues that could interfere with success, the match between the work environment and the person's needs, and possible supports and accommodations.

State Departments of Vocational Rehabilitation

Every state has a vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency that is designed to help individuals with disabilities meet their employment goals. Vocational rehabilitation agencies assist individuals with disabilities to prepare for, get, keep or regain employment. To find a VR office in your state, see State by State VR agencies or State Vocational Rehabilitation.

Intellectual or Developmental Disability (IDD) Agency

An intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) agency is a state organization that funds a wide range of services for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, including day services and residential services. The types of day services funded vary substantially in their scope and include assisting people to gain employment in the general labor market. To find the State Intellectual or Developmental Disability in your state HERE.

CHECK YOUR PROVIDER

Make sure the provider you choose has a proven track record of finding competitive integrated employment for people with ASD, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, and people with other significant disabilities. Learn about all the possible support options available in your area and shop around for the best one. Knowing more will allow you to be in the "driver's seat" rather than passively accepting what you're being told. - SOURCE

COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

Community Rehabilitation Providers

Community rehabilitation providers (CRPs), also known simply as providers, are local community organizations that provide services to adults with disabilities. Typically, providers offer three primary services: employment services leading to integrated employment in the general labor market; (work opportunities in a sheltered workshop with other workers with disabilities; or non-work activities in either a program facility or in the community.

If a person with ASD is looking for a job, they will likely need support from a provider. A job seeker will work with employment support professionals who are also known as employment specialists, employment consultants, or job coaches. CRPs are available almost everywhere in the nation. There is likely a choice of more than one CRP in most areas. It is critical to make sure that the CRP chosen has a proven track record of effectiveness at finding competitive integrated employment for people with ASD.CRPs are local programs and, therefore, most information is through their websites.

To find information about CRPs in your area, Google keywords such as “employment programs and disability." Make sure that you include the town where you seek services in your search. You may also explore the website of your state agency on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities or the state Vocational Rehabilitation program to see if they provide a listing of providers in your area.

Social Security Administration

The Social Security Administration (SSA) supports employment participation through several programs including work incentives targeted at individuals who receive Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Income, the Ticket to Work program, and the Work Incentive Planning and Assistance program. SSA work incentives, such as the Plan for Achieving Self-Support, Impairment-Related Work Expenses, and the Student Earned Income Exclusion, support employment by allowing individuals to exclude money, resources, and certain expenses from total earned income

The SSA also administers the Ticket to Work program, which lets beneficiaries receive employment support and other support services from a participating employment network or state VR agency. An Employment Network is an entity that enters into an agreement with the SSA to provide or coordinate the employment supports such as career counseling, job placement, and ongoing support at no cost to beneficiaries. Assigning a Ticket to an Employment Network allows the entity to receive payments based on the job seeker’s success in obtaining and maintaining a job. A Ticket may be used along with other employment support services funded with state, Medicaid, or VR resources. For more information, visit HERE.

Finally, the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program enables beneficiaries to receive free benefits counseling to help them make informed choices about work. SSA contracts with local community-based organizations that provide in-depth counseling about working, earning more money, and how working may affect your benefits. For more information, visit HERE.

Social Security Officer Locator: https://secure.ssa.gov/ICON/main.jsp

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Employment Screening Services

- Quality Employment Services: Will You Know it When You See It? - this brief provides guidelines and a process for people with disabilities to evaluate service options, in order to receive services that best meet their individual needs.

- Getting the Most from the Public Vocational Rehabilitation System - Describes the vocational rehabilitation system by responding to questions frequently asked by individuals with disabilities. Its goal is to provide the readers with the information that will help them get the services they need to reach their employment goals.

Other Resources

- Charting the LifeCourse Framework - Helps individuals and families of all abilities and all ages develop a vision for a good life, think about what they need to know and do, identify how to find or develop supports, and discover what it takes to live as they want to live. Originally developed for people with disabilities, the framework is universally designed for use by any person or family making a life plan, regardless of life circumstances.

- Supporting Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Quality Employment Practices - Written specifically for employment support professionals who might be working with job seekers with ASD, it offers considerations for planning, placement, and for some of the more unique job supports that may need to be considered.

- The Explore Work Curriculum - A plain language and interactive curriculum to be used independently or with a support person of one's choosing. Covers why people work, how to identify your interests, using state resources for support, and self-advocacy around employment. Specific links are Florida-based, but it tells the user how to find the same resources in their state.

- Real Work Stories - Through stories, pictures, and videos, this website shows individuals with significant disabilities at work in jobs that match their unique interests. At the same time, it offers some innovative strategies for finding and keeping jobs.

DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY-SPECIFIC

- A Purpose In Life - Why Employment First Matters to Self-Advocates
- The Truth Comes From Us: Supporting Workers with Developmental Disabilities