

Autism Spectrum Disorder: NETWORK NEWS

ISSUE: 53

May 2022

AUTISM IN THE WORKFORCE

“People who identify on the autism spectrum often have some of the most unique abilities and talents, making them appealing additions to any workforce. Yet, the unemployment rate for neurodiverse individuals is staggering. Upwards of 80 percent of individuals who are on the spectrum do not have a job.”¹

Necessity is the mother of invention. At least, that was the case for Thorkil Sonne when his son was diagnosed with autism. As he explained in a 2008 interview with Computer Weekly¹, he looked ahead (as all parents do) and tried to imagine a future for his son but was left disappointed. Noticing a paucity of professional prospects, Sonne was inspired to start his software company Specialisterne. He realized that characteristic traits of autism, “attention to detail, focus and precision”², were perfectly suited for tech-based work, and he began to look exclusively to this population for job candidates.

While Sonne may have been the first to pursue this novel approach to recruitment in the tech world, he certainly was not the last. Tech giants Microsoft and SAP have their own employment initiatives which target candidates with neurodiversities. An article by CBS News in 2018 about these initiatives came to the same conclusion Sonne had reached a decade before: autistic employees are a unique, but largely untapped, resource in the workforce. Reflective of the challenges faced by qualified neurodiverse individuals seeking employment is the experience of Christopher Pauley who is an autistic adult interviewed for the CBS News story. After hundreds of unanswered job applications (despite an impressive degree in computer science and a history of high academic achievement), he finally found a role at Microsoft where his “ability to recognize patterns and his acute attention to detail”³ was put to good use.

In spite of their willingness to hire autistic candidates, it quickly became evident to companies that traditional interviewing practices did not work well. As Pauley explained, his struggles with social and communication skills made in-person interviews challenging and routinely overshadowed his strong non-social qualifications. Both Specialisterne and Microsoft found ways to overcome this barrier. Specialisterne uses Lego in their interviews to assess applicants’ skills, while Microsoft relies on marshmallows. Jenny Lay-Flurrie, officer at

CONTENTS

FEATURE ARTICLE:
AUTISM IN THE
WORKFORCE

01-02

FUN FACT

02

DID YOU KNOW?
READ ALL ABOUT IT

03

TEACHER TIP
REFERENCES

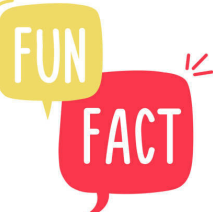
04

Microsoft, explains that assigning a task such as building structures out of marshmallows allows candidates to demonstrate their problem-solving and teamwork skills without having to struggle through face-to-face interviews. As well as using unconventional interview tactics, both Specialisterne and Microsoft have introduced scaffolding strategies to ensure the success of their autistic employees. At Specialisterne, months are spent to determine the specific roles best suited to each candidate. At Microsoft mentors are assigned to help autistic employees navigate the workplace.

These hiring initiatives have yielded very promising results: SAP boasts a 90% retention rate among ASD hirees, and Specialisterne has expanded globally and launched their neurodiverse hiring in new cities (including Montreal). The positive effects on autistic hirees is also clear. Gloria Mendoza, an autistic employee at SAP, explains that she has found an accepting social circle at work, something she didn't experience while at school³. Christopher Pauley is also reaping the benefits of an inclusive workplace. He is now living completely independently and reports that he "looks forward to arriving at a place where he's accepted for who he is"³.

The lesson to be learned from these hiring initiatives is clear: the ends justify the means in developing more inclusive hiring initiatives and interviewing practices. Autistic workers, because of their accessibility and the skillsets they bring to the workplace, are an impressively valuable resource available to companies who are willing to move beyond conventional employment approaches and implement more inclusive practices.

What is a "TEVA"?

A yellow speech bubble with the word "FUN" in white, and a red speech bubble with the word "FACT" in white. A small red arrow points from the "FUN" bubble to the "FACT" bubble.

One to three years prior to leaving the youth education sector, students with learning and/or neurodevelopmental difficulties are invited to take part in the TEVA Process. TEVA puts the student at the center as the most important agent in their future. This Transition from School to Active Life Plan brings together the student and their support team (e.g., parents, school staff, workers in social and health networks, employment agencies, and other community organizations). Together, the support team works to amplify the student's voice as they discover, identify, and articulate their wants and needs for their future.

The TEVA plan addresses many domains of functioning such as social integration, education and training, preparing to enter the workforce, accessibility to health and social services, and general life skills. The support team recognizes both what areas the youth is excelling in and where they will require support as they move forward. Most importantly, the TEVA plan identifies the concrete steps the student and their support team must take in order for the student to have as successful a transition to adult life as possible.

A well implemented TEVA plan leaves the student feeling ready for their journey into adulthood and independent living. The community members and organizations involved with the student are all critical stakeholders in the young adult's success and engagement with the world around them. A TEVA plan builds connections to support the student in their efforts to succeed in all areas of their life.

For more information, please consult LBPSB's TEVA website at:
<https://sites.google.com/lbpearson.ca/teva/who-attends-a-teva-meeting>



THE ACCESS CENTRE

AT JOHN ABBOTT COLLEGE

We wanted to take the opportunity to highlight an amazing initiative at John Abbott College (JAC). The Access Centre at JAC is offering a Transition Support Program (TSP) for ASD students entering their first year of college. This is a voluntary support measure intended to better equip new students with the tools and knowledge necessary to make a smooth and successful transition from high school to college.

TSP includes a Transition Support Day held before the start of the semester, as well as one-on-one meetings with an Access Centre staff member at various times throughout their first semester. The target of this program is Secondary 5 students with ASD who are graduating in June 2022.

The goal of TSP is to:

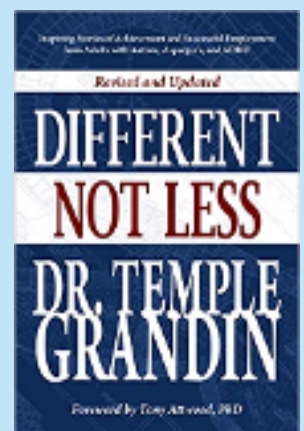
- Offer timely and structured support to ensure a successful transition.
- Provide opportunities to socialize with other students before school starts to foster social integration and inclusion.
- Share a toolkit of knowledge on various topics such as how to: a) access the support services on campus, b) navigate the campus itself, c) be a successful student (SMART goals, teamwork etc.), and d) communicate effectively (to name a few).

For all questions and inquiries regarding TSP and other services offered by the Access Centre at JAC, we invite you to contact the team directly by email: access.centre@johnabbott.qc.ca.

READ
ALL
ABOUT
IT

Once again, Dr. Temple Grandin takes us on a compelling, eye-opening journey into the world of 14 adults with autism, Asperger's, and ADHD as they navigate the challenging transitions into adulthood and the workforce. Through her book *Different Not Less*, Dr. Grandin sets the stage for her co-authors to highlight the many difficulties they overcame to achieve the successful and fulfilling employment that added meaning and value to their lives. The candor and courage of these individuals is not only admirable but serves as a powerful reminder that, as parents, practitioners, and educators, we should pay particular attention to the unique needs and experiences of autistics and appreciate the beautiful diversity they bring to our human spectrum.

If you are interested in borrowing this book from the ASD Library, please reach out to Eithne Sheeran at esheeran@lbsb.qc.ca.



ASD TEAM MEMBERS

JACALYN ARMSTRONG

Consultant for Inclusive Education

PATRICIA ASSOUD

Consultant for Autism (On leave)

DR. ANDREW BENNETT

Coordinator/Psychologist

JENNIFER BOOTH

Consultant for Autism (On leave)

PATTY CLORAN

Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

KATIE COHENE, PhD

Coordinator/Consultant for Autism

DATEVIG ETYEMEZIAN

Consultant for Autism

SABRINA GABRIELE

Consultant for Autism (On leave)

JADE LAWSANE

Consultant for Autism

ILANA LOGGIA

Consultant for Autism (On leave)

NATALIE MONGEAU

Consultant for Autism

HELENE PACKMAN

Speech & Language Pathologist

DR. AMIRA RAHMAN

Psychologist (On leave)

KIM SEGAL

Consultant for Autism

EITHNE SHEERAN

Consultant for Autism



Employment offers valuable positive outcomes, such as a “sense of purpose, financial independence and quality of life” which serve as “important indicators of adult success”⁴. For most people, this stage of life occurs automatically, but for autistic

individuals it has to be meticulously planned, in order for them to experience their “rite of passage into adulthood”⁵. Hence, it is imperative to identify how our schools’ strength-based approaches and inclusive practices provide the foundation for emerging neurodiverse workforce initiatives known as *autism-friendly practices*⁶. Here are two examples that demonstrate how school-based best practices emphasizing individuals’ strengths and building on their unique interests result in better academic engagement, productivity, and self-fulfillment⁷:

1. Using individual interests as key motivators to engage students in various learning activities and academic tasks:
 - A. Elementary level: using the token economy system with their favorite character/object or allowing them access to their highly preferred activity after completing a less preferred one.^{7, 8}
 - B. Secondary level: completing 5 predetermined science assignments unlocks the option of completing a science assignment that incorporates the student’s individual interest and allows the teacher to provide direct feedback and scaffold their unique skills.
2. Using the individual strengths to facilitate the discovery of key concepts. For example, in regard to students who pay specific attention to detail and learn best through manipulating objects, a strength-based approach to teaching about solids would be to allow the student to use marshmallows and toothpicks to create and subsequently label the various solids they are learning about.

Finally, if they begin to view autistic students’ unique learning styles and special interests as assets and gateways to future employment, teachers will be adopting an ideal frame of mind for meeting their needs and building upon their talents and preferences.



REFERENCES



To access the complete list of references, please [click here](#).