

The Autism Society's Focus on Employment Initiatives Taking Place in Minnesota

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The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy theme for October 2011's National Disability Employment Awareness Month is "Profit by Investing in Workers with Disabilities." The theme informs the public that individuals with disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorders (ASD), represent a highly skilled talent pool that can help employers compete in today's global economy.

A National and Statewide Priority

At the Autism Society, employment has become an emerging issue of national concern as a growing number of individuals diagnosed with ASD moves from adolescence into adulthood. This passage, when individuals transition from the federally mandated educational services provided by public schools to the uncertainty of adult services and employment opportunities, is extremely stressful for families. Recognizing that unemployment is one of the most pressing needs for the more than 1.5 million people on the autism spectrum, the Autism Society has made employment options and workforce

development a top priority for the organization. This priority is aligned with the organization’s mission of improving the lives of those affected by ASD.

The Autism Society believes it is important to ensure that all individuals on the autism spectrum have the opportunity to participate in vocational training (both in school and after graduation) to gain the necessary skills to get and keep a job, and live independently. The Autism Society also believes that all individuals on the autism spectrum should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful work during their adult lives. At the national level, the Autism Society hopes to build out an employment model that will:

- provide individuals with autism and their families information early on to build employment skills while they are still in school;
- train and empower individuals with autism to seek out the right job for them, and develop interview and job access skills to make their search successful; and
- create a replicable model of supported employment that companies can incorporate into their recruitment and hiring practices.

Employment in the community setting was once thought to be improbable for individuals with autism (Nesbitt, 2000; Schaller & Yang, 2005). Experience, however, has demonstrated that individuals with autism can work in a variety of community placements (Muller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, 2003; Schaller & Yang, 2005). Individuals with autism have unique challenges, but also distinctive strengths that may require different supports and/or adaptations in the workforce. Having a disability, such as autism, should in no way diminish “the right of individuals to live independently; enjoy self-

determination; make choices; contribute to society; pursue meaningful careers; and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural and educational mainstream of American society” (Rehabilitation Act, 29 USC Sec. 701). Employment of individuals with autism can be enhanced through implementation of national and statewide systems that provide meaningful and effective opportunities for individuals with disabilities in integrated work settings. This article highlights employment initiatives taking place in the autism community at the state level in Minnesota.

Educating and Engaging Employers

As those living with autism age, the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM) is working to support their vocational development. Recognizing that employment is part of a better future and enhances the lives of those living with ASD, AuSM is ensuring that attention and community resources are given to employment initiatives for people with autism. Sherrie Kenny, the executive director of AuSM, states that her organization is focusing on the limited knowledge employers have about autism, and how to get and keep employers engaged. A passionate leader, Kenny is asking employers important questions,

such as “Do your hiring managers understand the characteristics of ASD?” “How is your corporation working on the retention of employees with ASD?” “How is your corporation helping parents balance work and life when they have children with ASD?” and “How many customers are coming into your business that are individuals with ASD?”

To answer these questions at the state level, AuSM has launched employment partnerships with agencies such as the Council on Developmental Disabilities and Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and corporations headquartered in Minnesota. These mutually focused partnerships bring together key players to work on job growth for individuals with autism. A goal of these partnerships is to expand employment opportunities for individuals with ASD within the state.

AuSM is also teaming with local companies to create opportunities for employers to learn about autism and employment by developing basic 101 autism workshops and customized consultation methods for human resource recruiters and hiring managers.

Additionally, AuSM has and continues to facilitate roundtable discussions and conferences with employers, institutes of higher education, educators, service providers, parents and individuals on the spectrum to develop solutions and strategies that can break down barriers to job entry and retention. Some of the companies that participated in the first discussion included 3M, Best Buy and Cargill, all headquartered in Minnesota.

3M’s commitment to hiring and retaining a diverse workforce extends throughout their organization. 3M’s Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) provides information and resources to employees and their families on disability issues, such as awareness and education,



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Sherry Kenny and Dr. Temple Grandin

accessibility, accommodations, and employee recruitment and retention (http://solutions.3m.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/us-diversity/diversity/3M/employee-resource-affinity-groups/disability-advisory-committee/). Best Buy started a group called Facing Autism in a Caring Environment (FACE), which focuses on addressing issues impacting those with ASD, including supporting sustainable employment. Best Buy seeks ways to hire and retain individuals with ASD, as well as creates tools and methods to inform managers about hiring individuals on the spectrum, so that they can tap into the talents of this valuable resource of individuals (www.bestbuy.com). Cargill is another corporation working on building awareness and understanding to develop their ability to use the full range of talents and perspectives of diverse employees (www.cargill.com).

State Resources

Many individuals with autism are skilled and adept in the field of technology. Utilizing individuals with ASD in the technology industry has been successful in other countries, such as Denmark. In 2004, entrepreneur Thorkil Sonne founded Specialisterne (The Specialists; www.specialisterne.com/), hiring people with ASD like his son (see article in this issue). Sonne matches the unique skill sets of individuals with ASD with business needs and has made it possible for employees to excel in the workplace without having to worry about meeting social expectations. In 2010, the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, with support from Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), Department of Employment and Economic Development, created a website titled "Meet the Future Face of

Employment: Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Technology Fields" (www.mnddc.org/asd-employment). The website lists specific actions that individuals and families, educators, employers and VRS staff can take to facilitate the education, training and employment processes that result in careers in the technology fields for individuals with ASD. The specific list for employers helps them understand employees with ASD, so that they can attract, supervise and retain tech-savvy people.

An important component of AuSM's advocacy and awareness efforts is to help employers create accepting work environments and understand the benefit of hiring and retaining an underutilized workforce of many talents. Thus, AuSM produced a brochure titled "Employment Strategies: Understanding People Who Have High Functioning Autism and Asperger Syndrome" (www.ausm.org/supportServices/employment_strategies_brochure.pdf). The purpose of the brochure is to ensure that employers can recognize and value the expertise and qualities of individuals on the autism spectrum. AuSM's brochure provides a list of characteristics that indicates to a recruiter or hiring manager that an individual could have ASD. To help alleviate managers' fears about hiring individuals on the spectrum, this brochure also highlights the talents, focus, creativity and personal characteristics of this population. Individuals with ASD often think differently or "outside the box," which can lead to creative and innovative problem solving. AuSM is planning to publish a book designed and created for employers on the subject of hiring and retaining those who, as autism advocate and animal scientist Dr. Temple Grandin states, are "different not less" (Dr.

Grandin is writing the foreword to the book).

Minnesota is providing opportunities for employers to meet and understand employees with autism by sharing their individual life stories highlighting strengths and successful work experiences (www.mnddc.state.mn.us/asd-employment/2b-mn-success-asd.html). One such story involves an individual with Asperger's, Ryan Hemphill (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-sVj4Ja-tM). A customer specialist with Best Buy in Texas, Ryan loves electronics and visited his favorite store, Best Buy, often to shop, which led to an interview for a job. During the interview, the manager at Best Buy was able to see Ryan's uniqueness and potential. According to Ryan's manager, he has a phenomenal work ethic. Ryan's mother said that working with the public at Best Buy has helped him to become much more socially aware and adept.

Another story highlights Bradley Olson who works on a website for a growing retail company. His photographic memory, programming knowledge and photo-editing skills are an asset for the sound, lighting, video and intercom equipment provider. While Olson may struggle to communicate verbally, his written communication skills are clear and professional.

Another employment initiative in the state involved updating the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities self-study online course titled "Partners in Employment" with resources and content helpful for individuals with ASD looking to acquire meaningful employment (www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/employment). This course provides practical skills to help individuals find employment in their community. The course content helps individuals acquire

pre-employment skills, such as how to create a resume, navigate the hiring process, network to identify potential employers, and evaluate a job that fits the individual's skills and dreams.

Raising Awareness of Employment and Autism

On February 17, 2011, AuSM hosted an inaugural Autism and Employment Forum, bringing together over 1,600 individuals who share the vision that employment for those living with ASD is a quality-of-life issue. Dr. Temple Grandin spoke at the forum and was inspirational in raising awareness on the future of those living with autism.

On June 30, 2011, AuSM is hosting a workshop titled "Autism at Work: Hands-on Tools for Accessing Autism's Talents." Geared to employers, service providers and families, this workshop details how employers can tap into autism's talent pool. AuSM's executive director states that the goal is to sustain and build the employment forums.

With education comes change, with change comes acceptance, and with acceptance comes investment. With 40 years of experience in education,

advocacy and support, AuSM is reaching out to inform and engage employers. For more information about AuSM's advocacy in the area of employment, visit www.ausm.org.

The national Autism Society applauds the Autism Society of Minnesota on their statewide employment efforts and encourages other chapters and organizations in the autism community to create and support opportunities in the workplace for individuals with autism, so that they can maximize their independence and quality of life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Presenters at First Annual Autism and Employment Forum (l-r): Linda Ireland, Sherrie Kenny, Cindy Holker, Temple Grandin, Bill Bruckner, Sandy Tokach, & Susan Larson