

Employment

This informative publication ensued from the collaborative works of Family Network on Disabilities and ASAN. Family Network on Disabilities understands and respects the beliefs and opinions of those who choose not to use “Person First Language.”

At FND, we respectfully prefer to use “Person First Language.”

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Nothing about us without us!

What is transition?

A transition is a shift or movement from one thing to another. In this tipsheet, “transition” means moving into adulthood. This includes the changes in responsibilities, expectations, and abilities that come with that.

Transitions can be difficult for anyone; most people take comfort in familiar settings. People with Autism Spectrum Disorder often use routines in order to better navigate life, and a sudden change - beginning or leaving school, or getting a job - can be very unpleasant. Preparing people with autism for change, and making the change less sudden, makes this easier.

Many changes in life are unavoidable. Fortunately, you can cope with these changes.

Rights and Responsibilities

As an autistic person, you have the right to apply for any job, internship, or volunteer position you are qualified for.

You have the right to not be discriminated against when you apply for a job. Any future employer is **not** allowed to ask questions about your disabilities when those questions do not directly relate to your ability to perform the job at hand. For example, your interviewer cannot ask, “Are you autistic?” or “Are you disabled?” However, they can ask you something like, “How do you handle stressful situations at work?”

Like any other employee, you have a right to a legal salary. You also have a right to any reasonable accommodations you may need; however, getting

accommodations may mean that you have to disclose that you are autistic.

For more information on accommodations for autistic people, you can refer to the “supports” section of this tipsheet.

With employment comes responsibilities. You have a responsibility to always do your job to the best of your ability, or be fired. Also, if you do require any accommodations or supports, it is up to you to get them from your employer.

Goals

Everyone has a different set of advantages and disadvantages, so everyone has a different set of goals in life and in the workplace. However, most people have goals that are pretty similar.

These goals usually include:

- Achieving a certain degree of financial independence
- Reaching a specific point of professional development
- Obtaining a sense of personal satisfaction from his or her work

However, no two people are going to have the exact same professional goals. Everyone offers something unique to a workplace, and so the expectations of each employee are going to be different, as well.

Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

“Self-advocacy” and “self-determination” mean people with disabilities having as much control as possible over their lives. In the autistic rights movement, self-advocacy calls for autistic people to be able to decide for themselves what their lives will be like, and how to live them.

While autistic people may need help from outside sources, we get to decide what that help may be and who we wish to get it from. Self-advocacy applies to employment because having a job enables people to have more control over their lives, which in turns allows them to become stronger self-advocates.

Why work?

People may choose to work for many different reasons, but there are a few general reasons that most people use to explain why they work to others:

- “I work because I want more money”: Most people work mainly because they need or desire the money earned from it. It allows them to achieve more independence and stability, both financial and otherwise.
- “I work because I enjoy what I do”: A lot of people also choose to work simply because they enjoy it. Some simply enjoy the chance to get out of the house and interact with others, and others have a strong passion for their work. Additionally, some people experience a sense of belonging or purpose from their work.
- “I work because I want to build my résumé”: Some people,

especially young adults, work in smaller jobs or internships in order to get more experience for a future career. Many employers prefer to hire employees with previous work experience. They want people that have already proven themselves to be capable of working well. In many cases, an easy way to do this is by obtaining a volunteer position, or by working an easier job before applying for a more difficult position

There are many benefits an autistic person can experience through employment, such as earning money, meeting people with whom they share interests, or enjoying their job.

Can I work?

Absolutely! Everyone has a different set of strengths and weaknesses. There are jobs available for all types of people with many different skill sets.

If you dislike social situations, you can look for a job with a company that gives you more independence. There are even some positions that let you work from home, if that is an environment you would prefer. If you need a workspace that is quiet and comes with a routine, an office job might work for you. If you need a job that is not too physically demanding, there are jobs that allow you to work with computers, or under other circumstances that don't involve physical exertion.

Barriers to Work

Most people who look for a job face difficulties. For neurotypical people and people without disabilities, this difficulty can come from lack of experience or a poor job market, among other things. For autistic people and people with disabilities, finding employment is more complicated. Autistic people face some of the same difficulties as neurotypical people in finding a job, but autistic people also face other, unique difficulties.

These difficulties can be addressed through accommodations, which are exceptions given by an employer to help make a job easier for people with disabilities. Accommodations are given to employees who ask for them.

There are available work supports for people with disabilities. An intellectual or developmental disability (IDD) agency is a state organization that funds services for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Various types of services are funded by IDD agencies.

IDD agencies can be found in all 50 states and in the District of Columbia. Autismnow.com has links to each IDD agency website. Each state agency helps people with disabilities, including autistic people, to find jobs and employment.

Sources: <http://autismnow.org/on-the-job/employment-options/what-do-we-mean-by-employment/>
<http://autismnow.org/on-the-job/the-employment-service-system/intellectual-or-developmental-disability-agencies/>

Legal Protections

As a person with disabilities in the workplace, you will have legal rights. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, you have the right to “reasonable accommodation” in your workplace - this is defined as “In general...any change in the work environment or in the way things are customarily done that enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal employment opportunities.” Employers can choose not to hire you if your disability completely prevents you from being able to do the job in question. They can also choose to not hire you for any reason they would use if you did not have a disability, or if they have a better-qualified candidate for the job. But they do not have the right not to hire you just because you have a disability- you have the right to not face job discrimination.

Accommodations

Accommodations in the workplace are often necessary for people with disabilities. An accommodation is a change that allows a person to work as well as they can. This may include changes in where, how, and with whom someone works. Not every person with a disability needs workplace accommodations.

The Autism Society of Minnesota has listed eight accommodations that may be critical to success in employment for ASD individuals. These include:

- clarifying job expectations
- using visuals to instruct and organize
- communicating in a direct manner
- structuring the workplace to avoid distractions and sensory overloads
- minimizing assignments with multiple tasks
- allowing more independent roles including assigning a job mentor
- establishing routines
- working with a job coach.

While some may need all of these accommodations, others may require only one or a few.

Social skills and sensory processing can be issues for autistic people in the workplace. In other words, this means getting along with your workmates and customers, as well as becoming comfortable with your surroundings.

Everyone learns at his or her own pace: some will learn fast, and others will need more time to learn how the workplace works.

Supports

Workplace support is becoming more available for employees with disabilities. For people with disabilities, supports can be very important for success in employment. A growing number of employers are hiring people with disabilities and allowing for support systems.

One method of support for employees is what Autism Now calls “supported employment.” In this system, individuals can receive the necessary support to succeed on the job. This may come in the form of job coaches, co-workers, or employment professionals. The emphasis is that employees with disabilities are treated equally with employees without disabilities. The needs for employers are also fulfilled.

Support systems can play a very important role for people with disabilities in the workplace. More workplace support can mean a greater chance for success. However, everyone has their individual needs and understanding these needs is critical.

Types of Employment

There are no limitations on jobs available for people with disabilities. However, knowing individual strengths, challenges, and needs are critically important in knowing what job is the right job. Accommodations and support are also important in finding the right job.

There are many different types of employment. These include full time jobs, part time jobs, paid and unpaid internships, and apprenticeships. These jobs can be found in a large variety of fields and trades.

More and more jobs are requiring degrees from two and four year colleges and universities. Apprenticeships often require completion of a specialty or trade school. As a result of these, a post-secondary education is often necessary for finding a job.

Internships

Some career paths are easier to start with an internship. Internships are intended to provide real world job experience to people, usually young people. Internships are usually brief.

The focus of an internship is job training; an internship is like an introductory job. Interns typically work part-time, no more than 20 or 25 hours a week, giving them free time to go to school or college. The work might be less demanding than what full-time employees would be expected to do. At the end of the internship, interns are sometimes hired as full-time employees.

An internship is different from a traditional job because, apart from being part-time, internships are often unpaid. The employer will not pay you for your services; the reason people accept unpaid internships is because they want to build up experience in their preferred field. This experience can be listed on your resume and improves the chances you will be hired by potential employers.

The main advantage of an unpaid internship is work experience; however, people who don't have the money to work a volunteer job won't be able to work an unpaid internship. In addition, paid interns may be more likely to find a job.

Many students take on part-time work while they are interns. Other students may get financial help from their parents, family, or loans while they work their way through an unpaid internship.

If you are a low-income student, there are some companies offering subsidized internships. The U.S. Department of Labor has an extensive list of companies that offer internships.

Employment as Part of the Transition Process

In the transition from youth to adulthood, having a job is very important. Being employed means being closer to independence. Internships provide job experience that make you a more likely job candidate, part-time jobs contribute to savings and are a step down the road to a living wage, and paying full-time jobs make it possible for many people to move into independent residence, alone or with a caregiver.

Becoming employed can be difficult, however, especially since people with job experience are more likely to be hired. Getting job experience sometimes means an unpaid internship, which are also in high demand and which some people can't afford to take on. Other times, it means seeking jobs at fast-food restaurants or supermarkets, which do not pay very well and are too overstimulating for many autistic people. Some companies preferentially seek out autistic people to hire, but these jobs, also, are in high demand, and are not possible for some autistic people to do.

If you can get a job, that means financial independence - paying your own bills, and choosing what you buy. It's hard to take on this responsibility at first, and you may want a family member, caregiver, or friend to help you figure out how to do these things, if you have someone like that available. For many people, though, these responsibilities are worth it. Being able to decide what to buy, where to live, and what to do with your time outside of work is meaningful and valuable.

How to Get A Job

Getting a job today can be quite difficult, and it can be even more challenging if you have a disability. Here are some tips that help a person with disabilities obtain a job more easily:

- **Build experience:** Many employers want employees who have already proven to be hard workers in other situations. Try to find volunteer opportunities or internships that relate to the job you want to have in the future. This way, you can build relevant work experience and get a firsthand impression of what your future work experience may be like.
- **Build a résumé and curriculum vitae (CV):** A résumé is a brief summary of your work experience and is what you send with a job application. It is no longer than two pages and includes your work objective, education, most recent and relevant work experience, special skills and certifications, and a couple references. Each résumé you have should cater to the specific job you are applying for. In other words, your résumé will be different for each job you apply for. A curriculum vitae, or CV, is a longer, more general document that contains the information in a résumé, as well as awards, publications, honors, affiliations, etc. Having an updated version of both can help make your job search experience much easier.

- **Stand out:** In your résumé and CV, make sure to showcase the things that would make you an asset to a company. Do you know another language (including ASL)? Are you familiar with Augmentative and Alternative Communication, or AAC? Do you have relevant computer skills? Do you have any certifications? Any of these, as well as other relevant interests, skills, accomplishments, and experiences, can help you to stand out as an applicant. Also, many websites, such as visualcv.com, allow you to host your CV online for free. Adding a url to an online CV can allow an employer to learn more about you as an employee, further helping you to stand out as an applicant.
- **Look for autistic-friendly companies:** Several companies are specifically targeting people on the autism spectrum to work for them, making it easier for autistic individuals to work for them. For example, Computer Aid, Inc. wants autistic workers to be at least 3% of their workforce by 2015. Also, Freddie Mac has established a paid internship program specifically for autistic undergraduates. For more information about companies searching for autistic employees, feel free to check out this article from CNN: bit.ly/15lx8gV, as well as ASAN's employment resources.
- **Be proactive:** When applying for a job, keep in mind that for each open position, there are many different applicants competing with you for that opportunity. Therefore, it is important to be proactive in your application process. Seek out the companies you wish to work for. Send in résumés and applications for them to keep on file, even if there aren't any openings at that time. This way, employers will know that they can already contact you if something becomes available. Finally, after sending in an application for an open position, tell the employer that you will contact them to follow up. Doing this, as opposed to making the company get in touch with you, shows that you care about the job.
- **Above all, practice and plan ahead.** Before a phone or in-person interview, ask someone to help you practice interview questions. Plan out the outfit you will wear during an in-person interview the night before. Also, always arrive to an interview 10-15 minutes before it starts.