

Autism Research Review

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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Reviewing biomedical and educational research in the field of autism and related disorders

Job market opens up to workers with autism

by Alison Blake

At an archeological dig in the American southwest, autistic and retarded workers help dig for artifacts and log information about their finds into a computer. On farms in England, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, autistic individuals raise poultry and cattle, grow crops, and do housework and building maintenance. And autistic and retarded workers are becoming an increasingly common sight at Pizza Hut, Carl's Jr. restaurants and other fast food chains across the U.S. which have policies encouraging the hiring of disabled restaurant employees.

Around the world, increasing numbers of autistic men and women are working as piano tuners, library assistants, carpenters, artists, laboratory employees, maintenance workers, amusement park employees, print shop assistants, waiters, assemblers and office workers.

A job is more than a task; it involves getting along with coworkers, handling change, behaving appropriately, and communicating with others—all skills that can be difficult for the autistic person to master.

Until recently, autistic individuals working in unsheltered employment were virtually unheard of—and even sheltered jobs were scarce. Today there are a growing number of programs teaching job skills to people with autism; tax credits and other incentives for employers who hire them; and job coaches and follow-up programs to help autistic workers and their employers.

While most employed autistic individuals work in areas such as food preparation, custodial work and assembly, new areas of employment are opening up—a trend that David Holmes of the Eden Institute believes will continue. "Improved education and programming plus more social behavior will result in a generation of people with autism who have better skills," he says in *Children*

with Autism: A Parent's Guide, "and as a result, increased employment options."

Even low-functioning autistic individuals appear to be capable of jobs once thought to

New job opportunities will open up as a new generation of better educated, more highly skilled individuals with autism enter the job market.

be beyond their abilities. Research studies by Sidney Levy, M. W. Gold, and G. T. Bellamy have shown that many severely handicapped people, including those with autism, can learn complex tasks such as assembling bicycle brakes, cam switches, and electric circuit boards.

Autistic workers face special problems

People with autism, however, often face much more difficult obstacles in gaining and keeping employment than individuals with other disabilities. A job is more than a task; it involves getting along socially with coworkers, handling interruptions and changes, behaving appropriately, and communicating with others—all skills that can be difficult for the autistic individual to master.

"For individuals with autism," Mary Van Bourgondien and Gary Mesibov note in *Autism: Nature, Diagnosis and Treatment*, "vocational training must emphasize the development of appropriate work habits or behaviors much more than specific job skills. Learning how to work for long periods of time and dealing with changes in routine are typically more difficult for autistic adolescents and adults than the specific job skills a task requires." Finding ways to motivate autistic workers also can be a challenge.

There are other hurdles, some of them financial. Training programs are often at the mercy of unpredictable government funding; and because of staffing ratios, many programs can accept only participants without severe behavior problems. Other hurdles however, are being removed: in the U.S., Social Security regulations—once a major

disincentive to the employment of disabled individuals—have been changed to protect disabled workers from losing needed disability payments and medical insurance.

Arranging transportation to and from work can be more difficult than finding job placements. Another problem, slowly being corrected as training programs become more versatile, is that high-functioning individuals with autism may wind up doing rote tasks such as assembly work which do not take advantage of their skills and interests.

In addition many people with autism, accustomed to being in school or residential programs with peers who function at their level, find it lonely and stressful to work around marginally sympathetic nondisabled people. And placements which start off on the right foot may "sour" as nondisabled employees tire of autistic workers' behavioral oddities and lack of social graces.

For many people with autism, however, jobs are a source of satisfaction and self-esteem. A study of 19 autistic employees by Stephen Edelson and Tracy Cohan of Pitzer College found that aggressive, self-injurious and other maladaptive behaviors decreased when the students began work, and they began dressing more nicely and behaving in a more socially acceptable manner. Their jobs, Edelson and Cohan say, exposed them to nondisabled role models and allowed them to take initiative, develop independence, learn new skills, and "achieve the feeling of success when a job task is completed."

Jobs also are a means of forming relationships with nondisabled peers—although this appears to be less true of autistic workers than those with Down syndrome or other disabilities. Edelson and Cohan note in their study of 19 autistic workers that "the

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