

Jobs: options for workers with autism increasing

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subjects have not developed any friendships or other relationships with the others in the work environment."

Jobs for autistic workers: sheltered, supported, independent

Job programs range from the traditional sheltered workshops, which generally focus on prevocational skills and simple tasks such as assembly work—and which offer a high degree of structure and security, but frequently provide little opportunity for development of new skills—to more independent forms of employment. Two such types of programs are:

Secure employment, which resembles a sheltered workshop but focuses on teaching more advanced job skills so that participants may eventually be able to join the competitive job market. According to Holmes, "secure employment usually works best with adults more severely affected by autism and those who have had little or no employment training."

Supported employment, which is designed for individuals who have good job skills and few behavior problems, but still require supervision and training in order to be successful in a competitive job. Workers have "job coaches" (employed by training programs rather than employers) who teach them job skills, reinforce appropriate behavior, provide assistance in obtaining transportation, and facilitate good relationships between the autistic employees and their nondisabled co-workers.

In the United States, employers receive a significant tax credit for employing disabled workers, in addition to the employee's free training and guaranteed completion of work (with assistance from the job coach, when

necessary). In return, they must comply with wage and hour regulations; integrate disabled employees with nondisabled co-workers; and sometimes make modifications to accommodate the disabled worker's needs—for instance, by making a work area wheelchair-accessible, or by making job sharing arrangements when the disabled worker is unable to complete some difficult tasks.

Supported work is designed to "place and train," rather than "train and place"; in other words, programs find appropriate jobs, place disabled employees in the jobs with coaches, and then provide intense, step-by-step on-site job training until the job coach can successfully "fade out" and transfer supervision to coworkers and supervisors. In addition to training specific job tasks, coaches help employees learn job-related activities such as clocking in, getting meals, and socializing with coworkers at break times.

In supported work programs, Gaylord-Ross says, "the disabled employee is not merely placed and left with nominal training by the educator. Rather, a teacher, job coach, rehabilitation counselor, or crew supervisor spends substantial amounts of time at the work site to ensure that the employee performs the job at competitive standards." In addition, the supported work agency can assist disabled workers who lose their jobs in finding new placements or regaining their benefits. Even when employees can work independently, the supervisor will make regular calls to the employer; provide a new placement and retraining if an employee quits; and intercede in times of crisis when an employee's job may be in danger.

Some programs, such as Gaylord-Ross's

Employment Retention Program, have a high success rate in placing students, in "fading out" job coaches, and in maintaining long-term placements. A 1988 study by Gaylord-Ross showed that of 50 students with varying learning or developmental disabilities (including autism) who were placed in jobs, 30 were able to retain their positions. However, those behaviors most likely to occur with autistic workers—aggression

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and attitude problems—were two of the most common reasons for terminations (others were absenteeism, slow rate of work, or removal from the program by parents).

The cost of supported work is a controversial issue. Some professionals argue that the up-front expense of one-on-one job coaching is too high to be practical for large numbers of employees. Others argue that while short-term costs are high, supported work fosters self-sufficiency and reduces the long-term costs of institutionalization or sheltered settings. The actual cost vs. benefit ratio will depend, all experts agree, upon how many supported work employees actually can become semi-independent or independent over the long term—a figure which currently is unknowable.

Three types of supported employment are individual placements; enclaves (small groups of about five to eight disabled employees working within a business, with a trainer supplied either by an agency or by the employer); and mobile crews, who work for agencies or companies that secure service contracts around the community.

Is supported work for everyone?

Some professionals insist that totally integrated supported work and independent work are the only appropriate options for autistic adults. Educator Ian Pumpian even questions the use of enclaves and mobile work crews, saying that many may not provide adequate social opportunities.

Others, including Bourgondien and Mesibov, believe that supported and independent work are appropriate for many, but not

Project Origins: autism and archeology

At an innovative job training program in Arizona, autistic and retarded individuals—some of them severely handicapped—are excavating archaeological sites, sorting artifacts, and entering data into computers.

They work for Project Origins, a program operated by the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Project Origins employs 17- to 22-year-old students in the Tucson Unified School District, who work alongside archeologists and receive salaries. The program, started with a federal grant, was conceived by special education teacher James Gittings, and is coordinated by Gittings and museum director Michael Faught.

Faught and Gittings have found that even individuals with IQs at the two-year-old level, or multiple handicaps such as retardation and blindness, are capable of doing some types of archeological work. In addition, many enjoy doing painstaking tasks which others may find tedious—and enjoy the prestige attached to an archeological job at a University.

In addition to working at the university, program participants participate in campus social activities, are learning to purchase items at the campus stores, and join other university students for meals at the Student Union.