

Tackling the Unemployment Crisis for Adults with Asperger's

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Transitioning into adulthood encompasses a wide array of new experiences: The emotional changes involved if an individual is leaving home, the cognitive challenges of navigating how the world operates, the acquisition of independent living skills, and managing new relationships—both romantic and professional—all come into play. But arguably, the greatest key to independence is employment, as it so affects our status in the aforementioned areas. Some avenues for placement exist for individuals with autism, but college-educated people on the spectrum seeking entry-level positions often fall through the cracks of our existing supports, resulting in unemployment or underemployment. ASTEP, the Asperger Syndrome Training & Employment Partnership, began a little over one year ago as an employer-focused non-profit hoping to improve spectrum employment issues for this population - from the inside. ASTEP's plan is based on training larger companies and assisting them with integrating individuals with Asperger Syndrome into their diversity and inclusion strategy.

Historically the autism/Asperger's Syndrome (AS) world promoted our population as capable workers through messages of social good or civic responsibility, with less of an emphasis on the economic and



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business advantages of employing this population. During our first year, ASTEP has learned that bringing the employer and their perspective to the process is key as solely training individuals with AS to “fit in” is not sufficient. Corporate culture itself needs to be a collaborator capable of adaptation as well.

In order to develop a true partnership between employers and vocational rehabilitation professionals, three things need to happen – outreach, training and demystification.

Outreach

In order to engage employers as partners in this process, organizations representing individuals with Asperger's must meet them on their home turf. Corporate conferences focusing on Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) or Human Resources (HR) are an ideal place to reach out to employers to begin the long relationship-building process required. While speaking at these types of conferences, ASTEP has found the response to our efforts to be extremely positive. Not only are conference organizers excited to have Asperger Syndrome represented on their agendas, the sessions are well attended.

And we have learned that, though large knowledge gaps exist, the corporate world is very familiar with AS, most likely thanks to both fictional and non-fictional portrayals through the media. Whenever we cite that most large companies - due to the prevalence numbers - probably already *have* many (undisclosed or even undiagnosed) employees with AS, from our vantage point on stage, the audience is a sea of nodding heads. These presentations are wonderful door openers, often leading to follow on discussions with employers.

Training

Yet even among corporations that are excited about increased behavioral pluralism inside their offices, most employers

are unsure that they have the managerial skill to integrate employees with a disability they only know about through the media, and to handle it over the long haul rather than the short term. This creates an opportunity for those looking to increase the employment rates of individuals on the spectrum. To take advantage of this opportunity, advocates must sell the benefits of hiring—accentuating the talents, the reduced turnover rates, and the untapped workforce for businesses that comes with the 80-85% unemployment rate for adults with AS. But perhaps the best first step is to focus on training programs that prepare companies to be successful employers of individuals with Asperger's.

All large employers are experienced users of D&I and HR training materials, making themselves better employers and managers of a diverse talent pool is a necessary goal. Large corporations often require their employees to complete a predefined number of training hours per year; and a course in creating a diverse work environment is often a component of this requirement. This, again, presents an opportunity to meet employers needs in a way familiar to them, while advancing the cause of employment for adults with AS. ASTEP fills this need by offering training materials targeted at managers, colleagues, recruiters and HR professionals that can be delivered to a broad audience

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through a company's intranet system, as well as live training customized to an employer's needs. The video based training teaches: 1) how to identify (though not diagnose) employees that may require different management strategies, and what those strategies are; 2) how to modify traditional recruiting methods—strategies based arguably 95% on socialization—that are one of the main reasons our population slips through the employment cracks; and 3) specific methods for remediating some of the issues that may arise in the workplace for individuals with AS.

Demystification

But change, even when it is championed by the D&I and HR departments, is slow. And what is apparent is that *companies will likely not commit to hiring people with AS unless they first are provided with an opportunity to meet some of them*. Call it “kicking the tires” or “testing the waters,” if you will, but companies need to feel confident in their own abilities to make such a relationship work. In short, employers are

looking to organizations representing individuals with AS to demystify what that means from an employment perspective.

In 2011, ASTEP launched a Corporate Lecture Series. The concept was simple – ask 6 large employers each to host one two hour session for a group of young adults with AS where the employer talks about the job search process, their corporate culture, and networking skills. A group of twelve young people with AS—all of whom who are recent, or soon-to-be recent college graduates—was chosen from a pool of thirty applicants. Six Fortune 1000 companies were then successfully recruited to host, and we had our first session in November 2011. Not only do these sessions allow companies to meet a group of young adults on the spectrum, the attendees are also provided with a learning experience where they can ask questions they might not have felt comfortable asking otherwise. As the seminar series is not a job interview, but instead an educational forum, the group is able to both share and resolve some of their confusion over job-related issues, such as what exactly “conservative attire” means, or how internal promotions are actually facilitated in large companies.

The real benefit of course, is the strong impression the attendees are leaving on the company representatives. These seminars are the beginning of building that relationship with these employers to create the broader awareness and inclusion of individuals with Asperger's in their diversity strategies.

The lessons above are ones that professionals working to increase employment statistics for individuals with AS need to know. But another lesson learned in our first year is one that anyone who knows an individual with AS can use. For employers, retention rates alone mean very little, just as hiring rates alone mean very little. A corporation could have a strong track of hiring underrepresented communities, but if those new hires all leave within a year, the company has failed in its D&I efforts, yet can still boast a high minority-hiring rate. And if a company does everything in its power to keep their one minority hire, then that company has a 100% retention rate. *Hiring and retention rates work in tandem*, and everyone working in the employment field needs to operate on this principal.

So how can individuals who are not vocational professionals use this knowledge? Everyone - parents, other family members, and friends - can advocate within their own companies for increased hiring practices of people with Hidden Disabilities, diversity training, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs, or interior support groups within businesses for minority employees), and awareness campaigns.

Secure employment can ease the burden of so many transition issues. Finding a place to live is so much less stressful when you know you'll be able to pay for that first apartment. A successfully employed person is a happier and more confident person, making them more attractive to others for all types of relationships. In the best-case scenario, how glorious are those feelings inside when you are paid to do something that you enjoy?

Michael John Carley is the Executive Director of both ASTEP and GRASP. He is also the author of “Asperger's From the Inside-Out” (Penguin/Perigee), and he has finished a second book, “The Last Memoir of Asperger's Syndrome.” He was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in 2000.