

VIEWPOINT

# New programs let adults with autism find meaningful work

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A month ago, my 25-year-old son, Elijah, who has autism, called me to say that he desperately needed a vacation. For nearly two years, he had been working part-time as a busser at a restaurant in Woodstock, New York, the small town where I raised him.

“I’m exhausted,” he said with a sigh. “I need some time to think.”

With a history of anxiety and depression, Elijah often needed to recover from the social demands of the restaurant. But, stoic by nature, he usually pushed through those tough times. In particular, he rarely accepted invitations to visit me in Boulder, Colorado, where I now live. “Sorry, I gotta work,” he typically replied. But this time, he wanted to visit.

After Elijah arrived in Colorado, he spent much of his time sleeping or resting on the sofa. As proud as I was of his perseverance and ability to piece together a living from minimum wage earnings and Social Security checks, I worried about him.

Research shows that most adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed. Elijah’s job had challenged him at first, but now he saw little future in it. In spite of his boss’ promises to promote him to a waiter position, he was stuck in a part-time limbo with hours — and pay — that shifted unpredictably from week to week. Like many other people with autism, he wanted meaningful work along with a decent salary.

Between 2002 and 2011, the number of individuals with autism seeking vocational services that could help them find such work rose nearly eight-fold, according to a 2014 employment outcomes report<sup>1</sup>. Yet despite support from vocational rehabilitation programs, people with autism receive low wages and limited working hours, the report suggests. Something needs to change.

## Tricky transition

**The breakdown in employment programs** for people with autism begins in high school. The school district in which Elijah was a student provided him with no connection to adult service agencies, even though federal law mandates such outreach. Nor did the district offer any guidance or opportunities for work experience.



## Home truths

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Back then, I pressed Elijah to attend college. He completed several courses with excellent grades, only to abandon college after a few part-time semesters, saying the social aspects of campus life **were too stressful** for him.

“Mom, I just want to get a job,” he said.

Employment had become more important to Elijah than earning a degree. As hard as that was for me to accept, I knew I had to let Elijah find his path.

Many young adults with autism have similar goals. Yet traditional vocational programs often do not help them get good jobs. According to a number of studies published over the past decade, some dated methods of job coaching can actually hinder adults with autism from securing meaningful employment. Ineffective programs include those that fail to foster mentoring opportunities or collaborative relationships with coworkers. And sheltered workshops in public schools or day habilitation programs often isolate people with disabilities by providing no opportunities to pursue work in the community. These lead to poor earnings and career outcomes.

## Modern methods:

We must replace obsolete approaches with methods that can boost employment, job retention, pay and employer satisfaction<sup>2</sup>. The best techniques include video modeling, in which coworkers, supervisors or job coaches demonstrate new tasks or effective ways of communicating on the job; adopting coworkers as mentors; and providing technological supports such as smartphones or tablets.

These supports may need to be gender-specific. Men tend to show more **repetitive behaviors** and restricted interests and have difficulty communicating. Women may have socially acceptable restricted interests, such as books or fashion, but often struggle with insomnia and anxiety<sup>1</sup>.

On-the-job training is key to securing competitive employment for either gender<sup>3</sup>. A two-year residential program in Phoenix, Arizona, called **First Place Transition Academy** matches individuals with jobs, often within months. Students receive on-the-job training supplemented by courses in independent living that range **from personal finance to conflict resolution**.

In November, I interviewed four Transition Academy students. The students, all men, work for businesses ranging from Macy's to the Diamondbacks Baseball franchise. Two told me that work gives them something to look forward to each day, and all of them said that it felt good to no longer be living at home with their parents. Most important to all of them was earning competitive wages while learning how to budget their earnings and live on their own. The men seemed tired, but said they were happy and fulfilled.

Employment is associated with better mental health, according to a June 2015 study. **Reducing mental health issues** may, in turn, improve the employment prospects of men with autism<sup>2</sup>.

The **Autism Research Institute** and the education company **uptimize** launched another new resource for young adults with autism earlier this year. Called "**Learn the Steps, Get Employed**," the online course consists of videos that deliver bite-sized lessons, each less than five minutes long, that take learners through the steps of researching jobs, applying for them and conducting successful interviews.

## Moving on

Elijah's first weeks at the restaurant were stressful. His difficulties with fine-motor skills, multi-tasking, and social interactions added up to a steep learning curve. But the longer he worked there, the more his social difficulties receded. And he began to understand the roles of the wait staff, cooks, dishwashers and floor managers. His boss was an amazing mentor, and several waitresses took Elijah under their wing, too. With time, his stamina increased and his depression and anxiety waned.

Two years later, the job seemed to be leading nowhere, however.

A week into his visit with me, Elijah told me that to improve his earnings and job prospects, he needed to move on. He wanted to move to Colorado to be closer to our large extended family, and return to college part-time, attending classes online so he could work, too.

As I write this, Elijah is on a plane to Colorado. He lined up a part-time job at a home and garden design company, starting the day after he arrives. He also has an interview for a second job at a gourmet coffee chain. He is considering pursuing an online associate's degree in business management once he's settled into his work routine.

I think my son can now say he's no longer 'in transition,' but has successfully crossed the road into adulthood.