Successful Employment of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication

LAURA RICHARDSON, ASHLEY MCCOY, DR. DAVID MCNAUGHTON, & ALAISHA SAYED

PRESENTED BY: ASHLEY MCCOY
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Introduction

• 50-75% of individuals with ASD are unemployed (1,2)
• 30% of individuals with ASD have complex communication needs and require AAC (3)
• Successful employment outcomes have been observed for individuals who use AAC (4)

What is known about individuals with ASD who use AAC and are successfully employed?

• Qualitative research design
  • Perspectives of person with ASD, parent, and employer
  • Semi structured interviews
  • Thematic analysis

Participants

• 7 male participants
• Ages 20 to 26
• Communication
  • Speech
    • No speech
    • Limited speech
  • AAC
    • Picture-based communication book
    • Proloquo2Go
    • TouchChat
    • TapToTalk
Job Descriptions

- Work activities (3 to 8 hours per day)
  - Bookstore (Laurence)
    - Reshelf books, wait on customers, clean
  - Butcher shop (Thomas)
    - Slice and package meats/snacks, wait on customers, clean
  - Cleaning company (David)
    - Clear cleaning area, clean corners/stairs, run buffer
  - Dry cleaners (Chris)
    - Tag/sort clothing, enter into computer, wait on customers
  - Gift shop (Vince)
  - Grocery store (Jason, William)
    - Bag groceries, run register, stock shelves

Data Gathering

- Person with ASD (online interview)
- Parent (survey, interview)
- Employer (survey, interview)

Talking Mats

Individual with ASD

Interview Responses Across Participants
Results: Themes & Subthemes

Benefits
- Individual
- Family
- Employer

Challenges
- Individual
- Family
- Employer

Supports
- Individual
- Family
- Employer

Benefits

Individual
- Financial
- Regular routine
- Social interaction
- Contribute to community
- Personal satisfaction

Family
- Peace of mind
- Break/relaxation
- Pride/Reward

Employer
- Hard worker/Focused
- Attention to detail
- Good attitude/Eager to please
- Attendance

Benefits to Individual

“He gets a paycheck and has something to do during the day and he has made a lot of friends that he never had before. He has learned life skills here.” (Parent L)
Benefits to Family

“The biggest benefits are peace of mind for me and something to do for him. I know he's being productive and happy, and I can have a little break.” (Parent D)

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Benefits for Employer

“He’s really good at upselling...I’ve never had an employee do that before even when I told them it was part of their job... It's all programmed into his iPad so when they order a certain meat he presses the button that asks if they want something we've recommended pairing.” (Employer T)

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Challenges: Communication

Technology Breakdowns: “But when he didn’t have his iPad he stopped speaking too, so he didn’t even try saying the prices when he might have said them out loud before.” (Employer J)

Challenges: Rules & Routines

“He had to learn everything on the job. What’s a jicama? How many apples will tear the bag? Why can’t you put eggs on the bottom of the bag? How do I work a cash register? That was all so new to him.” (Parent J)

Challenges: Rules & Routines

“Once a schedule goes up, he has to stay on the same shifts. We post schedules two weeks in advance so this is sometimes problematic. Even though he has open availability, he can’t switch shifts.” (Employer T)

Challenges

- Family
  - Fear of child losing job
  - Concern about supports
- Employer
  - Lack of training
  - Customers
- Individual
  - Communication
  - Rules & Routines
  - Gain & Maintain Employment
Challenges for Family

- “It’s so hard for workplaces to accommodate David’s needs. He needs so many breaks and things explained so many times so specifically. David has a lot of outbursts – he yells, cries, bangs his head. He doesn’t understand how to be around people, doesn’t make conversation. How can someone hire someone like that?” (Parent D)

Challenges for Employer

- “It would be nice if schools or human resources would provide guidelines on working with people who can’t speak. It was a lot of trial and error.” (Employer J)

- “I just figure it’s the customer’s problem when they don’t get him. They have to be exposed to this kind of thing. If they don’t want to be waited on him and deal with him, they’re free to go somewhere else. They don’t need to do business here if they’re going to be like that.” (Employer C)

Supports for Individual

- Communication: Communication app on mobile device, Use of scripts and preprogrammed phrases, Strategy for gaining attention, Assistance from others

- Rules & Routines: Visual Schedules & Flowcharts

- Gain & Maintain Employment: Connection to job opening, OVR/Community program, Transportation, Family assistance

Challenges

- Individual: Communication, Rules & Routines, Gain & Maintain Employment

- Family: Fear of child losing job, Concern about supports

- Employer: Lack of training, Customers
Supports: Communication

“Well he has to talk to the customers so he has phrases in his iPad... So they're in the order he needs them for that page... If he touches just one button it says what he needs to say, like asking the customers how they are today and what day they need their clothes back and if the shirts are boxed or bagged.” (Employer C)

Supports for Individual

- Communication app on mobile device
- Use of scripts and preprogrammed phrases
- Strategy for gaining attention
- Assistance from others

Supports: Rules & Routines

“The flow chart was a work in progress the first several weeks. Without it he just stands there not knowing what to do or ignoring customers.” (Employer T)

Supports: Rules & Routines

“Our computer system actually is picture based which is why he was able to progress from bagging to running the register. He can match the produce most of the time.” (Employer W)
Supports for Individual Communication

- Communication app on mobile device
- Use of scripts and preprogrammed phrases
- Strategy for gaining attention
- Mentor/Assistance from others
- Visual Schedules & Flowcharts

Supports: Gain & Maintain Employment

- Previous research:
  - Develop skills that are valued in the workplace
  - Find jobs that are a good match
  - Secure supports to maintain job (5)

Recommendations

- “Keep pushing and looking for local resources. There are lots of them out there and lots of people to help you.” (Parent L)
- “Keep at it! It’s helpful if you or someone you know own a business. Teach your kids to work hard and everything will fall into place.” (Parent T)
- “I would recommend putting in the time early on to develop a system for communication that is effective and efficient.” (Parent C)
- “It will be the hardest thing you do, but a great legacy for your child.” (Parent V)

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References


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