

Employment on the Autism Spectrum

Life Skill Strategies for Success

By Zosia Zaks, MS, M.Ed., CRC

Employment involves more than just earning money to survive. Employment is also about contributing to society. Employment is how a person senses his or her dignity. What are the best ways that job coaches, and EA and other professionals who help support adults on the autism spectrum, can help?

Self-Regulation: A Cornerstone Skill

Self-regulation is a cornerstone skill that is often overlooked. An individual who overreacts at work is in danger of being fired. Clients can use a 5-point scale to modulate the “amount” of an emotion, and match themselves to socially appropriate responses – *directly enhancing their behavior.*

While the 5-point scale in the graphic at right features color, such scales can be tailored to a personal preference an individual with autism spectrum disorder may have toward words, pictures, or symbols. If color IS used, it might work something like this: Level 5 is depicted by dark red. This is a bad situation for the client that requires an immediate response. Level 4 is “bad,” but not “as bad,” and so on.

Anger at Work: A 5-Point Scale

As well as use of colors and text, or other variables, scales can include specific instructions such as, “*Reece will call his job coach.*”

Does your client have difficulty handling criticism? Struggle when work supplies are low? Have a meltdown if the vending machine is out of potato chips? Put it on the scale!

Clients can also use scales to communicate without relying on nonverbal communication signals

such as facial expressions. Scales are an excellent tool because a client on the spectrum may be terrified, and yet may not “*look*” scared or he or she isn’t “*acting*” frightened. If the individual can point to a Level 5 on a Scared Scale, you can adjust your approach accordingly, and with better results.

The boss says I did the boxes wrong, and maybe I’m not right for the job.	I need a break! Reece will go to the room by the vending machines and call his job coach or other professional on his cell phone.
I have 30 minutes to Fed-Ex 80 packages, and I can’t find any envelopes.	I’m extremely angry! I can’t stay calm!
Someone rearranged the boxes after I spent all morning alphabetizing them.	I’m feeling very angry. I need a moment to calm down.
The boss said no drinking soda at my desk.	I’m feeling angry, but I can handle this.
I dropped a box of staples.	I’m upset, but OK.

Communication Strategies: Case Study of “Elron”

Elron carries an index card with a red stripe on one side and a green stripe on the other. Elron shows his boss the red stripe if he does not understand the instructions, and he then switches to visual instructions.



Brown Bagger

Conversely, if Elron is ready to proceed, he shows his green stripe. Before this system was implemented, Elron would rip packing slips when frustrated and had been deemed “unemployable.” However, now he is considered a valued employee.

❖ *Next step / lesson learned:* Systems like Elron’s are easy to implement. Successful communication at work involves the context of the situation. Unspoken and unwritten rules of social communication are referred to as the *Hidden Curriculum*. Social narratives – in formats that can range from a cartoon, chart, or even a small book – are a great tool for introducing social nuances and reinforcing positive skills that can impact the work environment. Use stick figures and leave out distracting details. Tailor narratives to the client’s literacy level and developmental understanding.

Sensory Planning: Case Study of “Jessie”

Adults with ASD can be bothered by noises, smells, and lights that don’t affect others. Someone can even have sensory issues with the texture of a carpet, the clashing colors of interior, the motion of a wheeled desk chair, or the hanging of a roof fan.

Jessie proudly completed a 16-week food service training course. Upon graduating, she got a job at a restaurant in a mall. Jessie walked out minutes into her first shift, stating that the restaurant noises and smells were excruciating.

She was deemed unsuited for a career in food service as a result. But perhaps Jessie could have worked at a quiet tea shop or “prepped” in the restaurant prior to opening. The point is, if her sensory issues had been considered, Jessie could have planned around her challenges.

❖ *Next step / lesson learned:* Clients should be provided with sensory system education. Occupational therapists can assess and address sensory issues, too. Strategies such as a perfume-free workplace qualify as reasonable accommodations. With proper planning, sensory issues do not have to be a barrier to workplace success.

Workplace Culture: The Case of “Sam”

Fitting into the workplace culture is also important. Sam simply refused to dress up. Shirts with buttons made him feel like he was suffocating, and ties made him feel like he was choking. He also insisted on wearing shorts even in the winter, stating that pants “cut” the skin of his legs.

“Elron shows his boss the red stripe if he does not understand the instructions, and he then switches to visual instructions. Conversely, if Elron is ready to proceed, he shows his green stripe. Before this system was implemented, Elron would rip packing slips when frustrated and had been deemed ‘unemployable.’ However, now he is considered a valued employee.”

His first vocational counselor required him to dress up for job interviews. Sam would take off the business slacks as the two of them drove to interviews. Conflicts ensued. He started working with a new counselor, who took a radical approach that involved *Sam’s love of animals*.

She found him a volunteer position grooming and feeding horses and cleaning stalls at an adapted riding program for children with disabilities. Sam was so good with the animals, and the children, that he was offered a job after two weeks. No one cared about his shorts!

❖ *Next step / lesson learned:* Matching the client to the right workplace culture can make a world of difference. If the employee client with ASD is failing on the job, look beyond his or her failings, consider what the individual is good at, and if he/she would be better and happier at a different position. The EA professional might recommend that a vocational counselor work with the individual to land a different job.

Emphasizing Strengths: The Case of “Jerome”

Jerome had a habit of wandering, which was a liability on job sites. One week, while sorting clothes at a store with his crew, security found him wandering around the parking lot. Another time, when the crew was cleaning up a local park, the staff reached Jerome just as he was getting into a nearby creek.

Then the crew was assigned to restock shampoo packets in hotel rooms. Jerome wandered off. The hotel owner saw Jerome wandering around the lobby and yelled excitedly, “*This is the guy I need!*”

The owner had been unable to find someone to work the night shift who would collect room service trays and deliver newspapers. Jerome thought a job wandering the halls was perfect.

❖ *Next step / lesson learned:* When we look at what people can do, we can find a spot in the community where that skill, talent, or behavior is valued. If you have a square peg, look for a square hole.

Human Factors: The Case of “Josh”

If nothing seems to be helping a particular client, perhaps “human factors” are getting in the way. A senior in high school, Josh expressed a desire to work using pictures. He signed up for a job trials opportunity in the spring. The first day that the van came to his house to pick him up, he refused to get on. Josh’s parents were bewildered. He refused to get on the van the second day, too.

In desperation, his brother offered him a \$50 iTunes card if he would just get on the van the

third morning. He did, and threw up. He had no way of telling anyone that van rides made him ill!

❖ *Next step / lesson learned:* When someone’s behavior is puzzling, check for potential problems in any of the following areas:

- Transportation;
- Personal care, such as dressing and eating;
- Sensory issues;
- Environmental (e.g. working) conditions;
- The level of physical activity or pace of the work;
- The degree of socializing required by the job;
- Anxieties around certain tasks; and
- *Executive functioning before, during, and after work.

*Executive functioning is an umbrella term for cognitive processes that regulate, control, and manage other cognitive processes, such as planning, problem solving, verbal reasoning, and others.

❖ *More lessons learned / accommodations:* Adjusting morning routines, shortening commutes, allowing flexible start times, and setting aside time to decompress from responsibilities can often resolve many of these challenges. The Job Accommodation Network – <http://askjan.org> – has scores of ideas and examples of or workplace accommodations.

Summary

Task training and career exposure are important in vocational development, but *life skills* are crucial to employment success. Adults use these skills at work every day. Strong life skills and strengths-based planning will help your client succeed on the job.

At the time of this writing, Zosia Zaks, MS, M.Ed., was working as a certified rehabilitation counselor (CRC). Zosia has written and spoken about disability issues and taught courses on autism at Towson University. He served on the Maryland Commission on Autism from 2009-2012. As a professional, self-advocate, and parent of two children on the autism spectrum, Mr. Zaks infuses his work with multiple perspectives, always seeking ways to foster inclusion.

Employment Challenges Q&A

Scott Standifer is a former University of Missouri trainer and instructional designer who has studied and written about employment issues affecting adults with autism. He has authored two resources on autism and employment, and specializes in helping professionals translate complex information into simple, accessible messages.

In the following Q&A, Scott discusses some of the obstacles that individuals with ASD typically confront in the workplace, and he offers suggestions to help professionals charged with helping them succeed.

However, social skills training and specific explanations of workplace culture can help those on the autism spectrum respond more appropriately in work situations.

EAR: *What obstacles do adults with ASD typically face in the workplace? How can they overcome these challenges?*

SS: Difficulty reading social cues is probably the biggest challenge for adults with ASD. In addition to the challenges with reading social cues, people with ASD tend to speak bluntly and don't cushion criticism the way most of us do. They might say, "That's a really ugly shirt," or, "This is a stupid way to sort files." It doesn't take long for that type of behavior to get them into trouble.

However, social skills training and specific explanations of workplace culture can help those on the autism spectrum respond more

appropriately in work situations. In addition, co-workers or workplace mentors should try to understand the nature of the person's challenges so they can meet them halfway and help them navigate office politics.

EAR: Are there any specific traits that individuals on the autism spectrum tend to have that makes them valuable in the workplace? How can managers and co-workers facilitate better workplaces for these individuals?

SS: Some common features of autism can actually be *assets* on the job. Individuals with autism generally like consistent work routines and complying with rules, procedures, policies, and standards. They often excel at noticing patterns and deviations from patterns, which can make them especially equipped for roles in quality control, computer applications, etc.

Also, when compared with other workers, employees with autism normally socialize less and don't waste time at work talking with their colleagues about the weather or upcoming football games.

EAR: What do you see as the most pressing issue facing individuals with ASD, especially with regard to employment?

SS: We still have much to learn about the best ways to support people with ASD in the workplace. Time and again, I have heard that employers or companies that make systemic changes to accommodate people with autism not only get productive employees with autism, they also find their existing "non-autistic" workers like and use the accommodations and become more effective employees. Everyone benefits.